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TOLERANCE AND INTOLERANCE IN THE WRITINGS OF VOLTAIRE:
THE INSTANCE OF THE JEWS

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Abstract

This thesis explores the apparent paradox that exists between Voltaire's promotion of universal tolerance and his negative writing about the Jews. It considers the way that past critics have tended to approach these two aspects of his work, often either ignoring those elements that do not fit with their view of Voltaire, or interpreting his comments relating to the Jews as manifestations of an 'antisemitism' that denies the sincerity of his drive for tolerance. We therefore explore today's understanding of the term antisemitism, and trace the development in such thinking from historical Christian anti-Judaism and anti-Jewishness through to the nineteenth- and twentieth-century pseudo-biological theories of race. The thesis contends that Voltaire's promotion of tolerance and his often vitriolic Jewish discourse do not offer contradictory arguments, but represent differing approaches to the same problematic questions: the causes and effects of intolerance, and the ways mankind might be encouraged to use reason and to avoid fanaticism. Using psychocritical analysis, we investigate Voltaire's figures relating to the Jews and the Christians, figures that represent them as both victims and victimizers. This methodology further allows us to consider Voltaire's own self-understanding, an understanding that appears not only in terms of an empathy with fellow sufferers, but also of a suggested awareness of a certain relationship to the Jews themselves. The thesis therefore presents two propositions: first, that it was Voltaire's unconscious acknowledgement of this (for him) troubling kinship with the Jews that gave birth to his more 'hallucinatory' anti-Jewish form of writing, and second, that it was only when he began to embrace this awareness, to tolerate his self-understanding, that he embarked on his programme to promote the rights of all people, including the Jews.

Table of Contents

Introduction	7
Critics' interpretations of Voltaire's discourse	8
Note on method	13
Choice of texts	15
 Chapter 1 The subject and object of tolerance	 19
 Chapter 2 Group identity as target of invective	 44
<i>Confused perceptions of Jewish identity</i>	46
<i>Sermon des cinquante</i>	51
'Juifs'	53
<i>Essai sur les mœurs and La Philosophie de l'histoire</i>	56
<i>Candide</i>	63
<i>La Pucelle</i>	65
<i>Voltaire's invective and the reproaches of Isaac Pinto and others</i>	66
<i>Christian presumed identity</i>	79
<i>Sermon des cinquante</i>	82
'Juifs'	83
<i>Essai sur les mœurs and La Philosophie de l'histoire</i>	87
<i>Candide</i>	92
<i>La Pucelle</i>	94
 Chapter 3 The false universality of religions	 96
<i>The Jews and the question of exclusivity</i>	97
<i>Sermon des cinquante</i>	101
<i>La Pucelle</i>	103
'Juifs'	106
<i>Candide</i>	109
<i>Essai sur les mœurs and La Philosophie de l'histoire</i>	110

<i>The Christian Word</i>	112
<i>Sermon des cinquante</i>	118
<i>Essai sur les mœurs and La Philosophie de l'histoire</i>	121
<i>La Pucelle</i>	122
'Juifs'	123
 Chapter 4 The tolerable and the intolerable	 125
 <i>Accusations of 'perversity and falsity' in the Jewish people</i>	 128
<i>Sermon des cinquante</i>	139
'Juifs'	143
<i>Essai sur les mœurs and La Philosophie de l'histoire</i>	145
<i>La Pucelle</i>	151
<i>Candide</i>	154
 <i>Allegations of the 'abominable' and the 'disgusting' in Judaism</i>	 155
<i>Sermon des cinquante</i>	157
'Juifs'	158
<i>La Pucelle</i>	160
<i>Candide</i>	161
<i>Essai sur les mœurs and La Philosophie de l'histoire</i>	161
 <i>Charges of Christian hypocrisy, falsehood and deception</i>	 165
<i>Sermon des cinquante</i>	172
'Juifs'	173
<i>Essai sur les mœurs and La Philosophie de l'histoire</i>	174
<i>La Pucelle</i>	176
<i>Candide</i>	178
 <i>The abominable and intolerable elements in Christian behaviour</i>	 179
<i>Sermon des cinquante</i>	183
'Juifs'	184
<i>La Pucelle</i>	185
<i>Candide</i>	187
<i>Essai sur les mœurs and La Philosophie de l'histoire</i>	190
 Chapter 5 Universal humanity and savage difference	 195
 <i>Old Testament barbarity</i>	 200
<i>Sermon des cinquante</i>	203

‘Juifs’	205
<i>La Pucelle</i>	207
<i>Candide</i>	208
<i>Essai sur les mœurs and La Philosophie de l’histoire</i>	208
<i>Christian barbarity and intolerance</i>	211
<i>Sermon des cinquante</i>	216
<i>Candide</i>	217
<i>La Pucelle</i>	222
‘Juifs’	223
<i>Essai sur les mœurs and La Philosophie de l’histoire</i>	224
Chapter 6 Enthusiasm and indifference	227
<i>Charges of Jewish credulity and non-reasoning</i>	237
<i>Sermon des cinquante</i>	238
‘Juifs’	241
<i>Essai sur les mœurs and La Philosophie de l’histoire</i>	243
<i>Candide</i>	245
<i>La Pucelle</i>	246
<i>Voltaire’s questioning of charges of indifference and non-resistance in the contemporary Jews</i>	247
<i>Sermon des cinquante</i>	249
‘Juifs’	250
<i>La Pucelle</i>	251
<i>Candide</i>	252
<i>Essai sur les mœurs and La Philosophie de l’histoire</i>	254
<i>Demonstrations of fanaticism and complacency by the Christians</i>	256
<i>Sermon des cinquante</i>	258
<i>La Pucelle</i>	259
<i>Candide</i>	259
<i>Essai sur les mœurs and La Philosophie de l’histoire</i>	260
Chapter 7 Voltaire’s self-representation in his drive for tolerance	263
<i>Conclusion</i>	280
Bibliography	283

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Tolerance and intolerance in the writings of Voltaire: the instance of the Jews

Introduction

This thesis aims to study closely Voltaire's representation of the Jews within the context of his enlightened propaganda as a whole, specifically his work on the question of tolerance and, within that framework, the place of religions in human life. In the main, existing studies of Voltaire as an Enlightenment writer give only brief, passing attention to what he writes about the Jews; on the other hand, studies of his statements about the Jews tend to set them in the context of modern antisemitism or the history of anti-Jewish prejudice. This thesis attempts to bridge the gap between the two, using methods of literary criticism that have not been exploited in this area in the hope of reaching an interpretative synthesis, a comprehension of the place of the question of the Jews that Voltaire takes from his own present-day cultural context and instates within the prospective vision of enlightenment.

Voltaire repeatedly addresses the issues of tolerance and intolerance, both directly and indirectly, and his discourse frequently refers – usually in highly negative, even vitriolic terms – to the Jews, their texts, beliefs and customs. It is impossible to make a proper assessment of the one aspect of Voltaire's work without giving full consideration to the other. Both together make up his thinking, and in seeking to present an argument about either aspect, we cannot ignore that part of his discourse which appears to contradict it. So this study extricates, from the many disparate texts through which they are scattered, Voltaire's often fragmentary Jewish figures, to borrow the expression used by Elisabeth de Fontenay in her study of 'les figures juives de Marx', and marks out the field of these figures as the central focus of discussion in this thesis. The difficulties that we face today could perhaps make Voltaire's enlightenment demystification of religious texts seem superficial, but we can bear in mind that his contribution was a very important stage in the development of our capacity at least to think about such issues; this thesis studies not just this demystification, but also its fragility.

While I shall attempt, where possible, to construct Voltaire's anti-Jewish discourse as a part of his larger discourse on tolerance and religion, in order to address the

charges of 'antisemitism' levelled against him, I am obliged to repeat the stereotypical collective fantasies which, unquestionably, his figures often reiterate. For this I do not apologize as a detailed exposition of Voltaire's stereotypical writing is a necessary aspect of this thesis. To determine how, for his contemporaries, his thinking could integrate his apparent antipathy for the Jews with his fight for tolerance, we have temporarily to restrain our reasonable critical reaction to his discourse. By doing this, I hope that we shall be able to assess the impact of the Jewish figures on Voltaire's work and on the public of his times, as well as their place in relation to the collective stereotypes as we understand them today.

* * *

Critics' interpretations of Voltaire's Jewish discourse

Voltaire is a writer who inspires totally opposing responses in those who read him, and the disparity in readers' reactions to his statements on the Jews is a particular instance of this. While some have dismissed his remarks as typical of his period and to be disregarded in the general appreciation of his works, others, accusing him of 'antisemitism', have condemned him out of hand. Summarizing some of these views in a chronological sequence, we find the following. J.H. Brumfitt, stating that Voltaire's writing is 'not altogether free from antisemitism' (1958), claims that it merely uses the Jews to criticize the Christians.¹ In a similar way Peter Gay contends that Voltaire's 'anti-Jewish remarks are a partly unconscious, partly conscious cloak for his anti-Christian sentiments' (1959).² This thinking is repeated by C. Lehrmann, who perceives however a double cause for Voltaire's comments; 'la lutte contre le christianisme', and 'une haine implacable contre les Juifs' (1960-61).³ Pierre Aubery asks whether Voltaire is not being 'modern' in attempting to represent the Jews with characteristics and failings common to all people, in seeking to 'faire rentrer les Juifs dans la commune humanité dont non seulement les anti-sémites mais aussi quelques prophètes tentent parfois de les faire sortir' (1963).⁴ Jean Bensimon

¹ *Voltaire: Historian*, p.59.

² *Voltaire's Politics*, p.353.

³ *L'élément juif dans la littérature française*, p.141.

⁴ 'Voltaire et les Juifs: ironie et démystification', p.78.

questions the way critics have tried to ignore Voltaire's 'antisemitism', or to interpret it 'simply' in terms of an antijudaism that was driven by personal experiences or the attitudes of the period. But, for Bensimon, with Voltaire 'l'antijudaïsme sert de tremplin à l'antisémitisme' (1967).⁵ Léon Poliakov accuses Voltaire of 'castrating' the Jews in order to combat 'l'obscurantisme ecclésiastique, d' écraser l'Infâme' (1968).⁶ For Arthur Hertzberg it is abundantly clear that 'Voltaire's contemporaries [...] did not doubt that he was an anti-Semite' (1968),⁷ and Gay, in a later quote, claims that, like certain other *philosophes*, he 'never overcame or even tried to overcome (his) prejudices against the Jews' (1969).⁸ Theodore Besterman considers that Voltaire's 'language was the language of his time, and we must not expect even the greatest of men always to rise above their environment' (1969).⁹ Arnold Ages describes Voltaire and other *philosophes*, such as Diderot and d'Agens, as 'heirs to Christian prejudices', but he contends that their anti-Judaism, 'while springing from the same roots diverged somewhat in its approach to the Jews. From a religious aversion we move in the *philosophes* to something resembling a racial antipathy' (1970).¹⁰ A. Owen Aldridge believes that the charge of 'antisemitism' 'may be substantiated only in the degree in which Voltaire may also be considered anti-Jesuit or anti-Calvinist. [...] He was merely taking advantage of a recognized propaganda technique to promote his campaign against institutional religion' (1975).¹¹ David Levy, although wanting to distinguish between Voltaire's antijudaïsme and his 'antisemitism', finds that 'l'un et l'autre se complétant, se confondant parfois pour former un tout désolant, compréhensible peut-être, mais injustifiable de la part d'un homme qui se voulait l'apôtre de la tolérance' (1975).¹² D.H. Jory contends that 'by his own lights, Voltaire was tolerant of the Jews, and he can only be considered anti-semitic (in the full sense of the term) if his writings, his actions, and his enlightened approach to social concerns are ignored' (1978).¹³ M.F. Nef finds in Voltaire 'un type

⁵ 'Un antisémite rationaliste: Voltaire', p.20, p.28.

⁶ *Histoire de l'antisémitisme*, III, 'De Voltaire à Wagner', 105.

⁷ *The French Enlightenment and the Jews* (1990), p.299.

⁸ *The Enlightenment* (2nd edn 1996), p.38, note.

⁹ *Voltaire*, (3rd edn 1976), p.92.

¹⁰ *French Enlightenment and Rabbinic Tradition*, p.69.

¹¹ *Voltaire and the Century of Light*, p.296.

¹² *Voltaire et son exégèse du Pentateuque*, p.234.

¹³ 'Voltaire and the Jews of Metz: Tolerance or Anti-semitism', p.98.

d'antisémitisme rationnel' similar to that of Kant and Marx. He then goes further and charges Voltaire with an 'antisemitism' which 'dépasse l'antipathie à la civilisation hébraïque pour aboutir à une volonté de suppression réelle ou symbolique des juifs, complice active ou consentante de la persécution' (1978).¹⁴ In the view of Frank E. Manuel, Voltaire's 'aversion to Judaism assumed the proportions of an obsession' (1982).¹⁵ But Pierre Aubery, reaffirming his position, remarks that a representation of 'Voltaire as an antisemite is both anachronistic and unwarranted' (1983).¹⁶ Pierre Pluchon, when questioning the reasons for 'cette hostilité, pour ne pas dire cette haine, ce ressentiment, chez le maître à penser de l'Europe', concludes that for Voltaire 'le Juif, c'est l'anti-philosophe, la conviction sectaire face à la tolérance' (1984).¹⁷ René Pomeau contends that with *Le Pour et le contre* (1722) 'l'antisémitisme ou l'antijudaïsme de Voltaire (les deux ici se confondent) se donne carrière' – evidence, he believes, of a 'father complex', founded on Voltaire's identification of the Christian God 'avec le Dieu vengeur de l'Ancien Testament et le Dieu cruel des jansénistes' (1985).¹⁸ Allan Arkush remarks that 'Voltaire, like other eighteenth-century deists, attacked Judaism in order to weaken the foundation on which Christianity rests', but he rejects Hertzberg's antisemitic interpretation of his discourse. For Arkush, when comparing the two religions, 'Voltaire apparently considered Judaism to be the "lesser evil"' (1993).¹⁹ Pierre Lepape says that, 'comme les préjugés n'épargnent personne, y compris ceux qui font profession de les combattre, Voltaire lui-même partage l'antisémitisme de la majorité de ses compatriotes' (1994).²⁰ But Christiane Mervaud considers that '[s]es positions de principe sont claires: un antijudaïsme religieux à ne point confondre avec un antisémitisme racial' (1994).²¹ Likewise, Marie-Hélène Cotoni observes that several critics 'jouent sur une double confusion: entre antijudaïque et antisémite, entre les anciens Hébreux et les juifs modernes', and she declares that her own position consists in arguing that 'on identifie à tort l'antijudaïsme religieux et l'antisémitisme

¹⁴ 'Le récit voltairien: Tolérance et resignation', p.127, p.119.

¹⁵ 'Israel and the Enlightenment', p.38.

¹⁶ 'Voltaire and anti-semitism: a Reply to Hertzberg', p.180.

¹⁷ *Nègres et Juifs au XVIII^e siècle: le racisme au siècle des Lumières*, p.70.

¹⁸ *Voltaire en son temps*, I, 'D'Arouet à Voltaire', 122.

¹⁹ 'Voltaire on Judaism and Christianity', p.242, p.238.

²⁰ *Voltaire le conquérant*, p.135.

²¹ *Le 'Dictionnaire philosophique' de Voltaire*, p.89.

racial' (1994).²² Roland Desné similarly marks out certain critics' non-separation of these terms, and he describes this as evidence of:

la confusion entre antijudaïsme ou antihébraïsme – critique des croyances juives et des mœurs des Hébreux d'un point de vue philosophique et religieux –, et antisémitisme (le mot n'apparaissent qu'au XIX^e siècle), idéologie raciale qui propose ou justifie des mesures discriminatoires contre les juifs.

He considers that to accuse Voltaire of antisemitism would be to forget that 'le propos voltairien s'inscrit dans une lutte générale contre le fanatisme et la barbarie' (1995).²³ Bertram Eugene Schwarzbach claims that it is justified to reproach Voltaire for his antijudaism, 'mais seulement si l'on se rappelle, en même temps son anti-siamisme et son anti-franciscanisme' (1997).²⁴ For John Gray, while 'his anti-Semitism originated partly in his hatred of Christianity', and while 'he could not forgive the people that had given birth to Christianity, [...] Voltaire's repellent anti-Semitic prejudices were merely those of all of European Christendom' (1998).²⁵ But Adam Sutcliffe, although referring to the author's 'personal antisemitism', also recognizes that there is a 'fundamental difference between Voltaire's judaeophobia and twentieth-century fascist antisemitism' in that his 'intolerance was held in check by his equally deep commitment to ideals of tolerance and cosmopolitanism'. Distinguishing 'different antisemitisms', Sutcliffe writes that 'the extent to which moments of purely destructive energy erupt into Voltaire's texts would be an indication of the extent to which he personally slipped from the tensions of his philosophy into an unthinking antisemitic hatred', a comment the critic explains further with the remark that 'it would [...] be appropriate to consider as antisemitic only such impulses and acts that stem from a rejection of the values of justice and toleration that Voltaire strove to promote'. For Sutcliffe Voltaire's writings manifest what he deems to be 'the tight web of antinomies and tensions that define the significance of Judaism and the Jews in Enlightenment thought' (1998).²⁶ Sutcliffe claims that even as Voltaire argues for

²² 'Voltaire lit la bible', p.187.

²³ *Inventaire Voltaire*, pp.80-81.

²⁴ 'Voltaire et les Juifs: bilan et plaidoyer', p.38.

²⁵ *Voltaire: Voltaire and the Enlightenment*, p.4.

²⁶ 'Myth, Origins, Identity', p.120, p.122.

the toleration of Jews, he 'implies that any genuine acceptance of Judaism is essentially impossible'. But, Sutcliffe continues, it is this 'enduring ambiguity that keeps at bay the collapse of Voltaire's anti-Jewish polemics into unrestrained verbal violence'. Re-emphasizing the problems inherent in investigating the issue of antisemitism, Sutcliffe comments that 'the accusation of antisemitism, and the immediate recoil that it induces, short-circuit investigation of the complicated relationship between the violent undercurrents of Voltairean Enlightenment [...] and their recuperable, or even indispensable, emancipatory ideals' (2003).²⁷ And Harvey Chisick concludes that 'given [...] his understanding of Judaism, Voltaire could not well have had a consistently sympathetic attitude toward the Jews. This is not to say, however, that he was antisemitic' (2003).²⁸

The above sampling of scholars' various positions calls for some brief remarks. Before the Second World War, Voltaire's expressions of anti-Jewish feeling did not arouse comment, but since then we see an increasingly complex scholarly polemic developing on this subject. He has been labelled an antisemite (Brumfitt, Lehrmann, Bensimon, Poliakov, Hertzberg, Levy, Nef, Lepape, Pomeau), and has sometimes been partially or entirely excused by reference to the current thinking of his times and of his milieu (Besterman, Gay, Aldridge, Gray). The division in this first group of scholars, between those who accuse him of antisemitism and those who excuse him, may be expressed metaphorically as an important difference in two global interpretations of the enlightened thinker and champion of *causes célèbres*. Those who soften their perception of the Jewish figures represent a will to remain faithful to Voltaire as our culture's representative figure of tolerance and humanity; certain others express, through their denunciation, the same culture's experience of loss of an exemplary model, a deeply disappointed 'falling out of love'. This difference situates the Jewish reference in Voltaire as the location of a late-twentieth century crisis in readers of his works and bears the mark of our era's tense relationship to the Enlightenment in general. I hope through my study to advance our knowledge of Voltaire's significance for this crisis.

Recent years have brought a more careful application, or avoidance of the term antisemitism, and while certain scholars (Aubery, Ages, Jory, Manuel, Pluchon,

²⁷ *Judaism and Enlightenment*, p.244, p.8.

²⁸ 'Community and Exclusion in Rousseau and Voltaire: the Case of the Jews', p.93.

Arkush, Mervaud, Cotoni, Desné, Schwarzbach, Sutcliffe, Chisick) do not hesitate to criticize Voltaire for anti-Judaism or anti-Jewishness, the distinction has become recognized between the thinking manifested in those two tendencies during his lifetime, and the pseudo-biological theory of race which engendered antisemitism in the nineteenth century and became central to twentieth-century Nazism. We find running through both the earlier and later instances a recurring emphasis on the pragmatic character of Voltaire's criticism of the Jews, a progressively developing enquiry into what larger set of preoccupations might constitute the real context, and thence explanation, of anti-Jewish passages which appear wholly incompatible with Voltaire's staunchly maintained values.

* * *

Note on method

While remaining as attentive as possible to the historical understanding that now exists of the persecution of the Jews and on the ways in which the persecution has been transferred to texts, and equally attentive to psychoanalytic and other theoretical studies of this problem, I intend to carry out my analysis by way of a comparative literary-critical reading of key passages in Voltaire's works. By putting aside the question of truth and unintended falsehood, the accuracy or not of his accusations – acknowledging at the same time those instances where Voltaire purposely distorts the meaning of the biblical scriptures – and provisionally suspending the process of moral judgement, this process should enable me initially to mark out the field of representation of the Jews in Voltaire's *œuvre*.

This method of critical reading, the uncovering and analysis of certain repeated figures in my chosen texts, has been partially inspired by Charles Mauron's *psychocritique*, elaborated in *Des Métaphores obsédantes au mythe personnel*. Although it must be freely adapted to the character of the Voltairean images under discussion, Mauron's methodologically restrained and theoretically modest application of psychoanalysis to literature may suit this demystifying critical writing better than more recent, more theoretically ambitious psychoanalytic approaches.

Mauron hopes by superimposing interrelated passages in several texts to ‘distinguer les réseaux d’associations, les figures mythiques qu’ils dessinent, enfin les relations dramatiques entre ces figures’. He sets out the stages necessary for putting this method into practice: the superimposition of the author’s texts, to reveal ‘des réseaux d’associations ou des groupements d’images, obsédants et probablement involontaires’; the uncovering of the structures discovered within the repetitions and modifications of these associations, and their themes analysed by reference to the analysis of dream images and processes, so as to arrive at an understanding of the author’s ‘personal myth’; and the checking our interpretation of this by reference to the known biographical evidence of the author. For Voltaire’s writing on the Jews, the reference is both to a personal myth and to a collective one. The vitriolic language of some of Voltaire’s Jewish references sends the reader in search of such methods as may defend him or her against the kind of reaction which puts an end to any reading, any effort of understanding, by resorting to a moral or ‘diagnostic’ judgement on the writer that would prematurely foreclose our questioning of the texts. The problem, after all, is not to decide whether or not the figures in question are anti-Jewish, but to try and understand the presence of such figures in a body of writing dedicated to an inspired emancipatory demystification of exactly that kind of prejudice.²⁹

Therefore, as this thesis aims to examine the question of the intrication of Voltaire’s attitudes about the Jews with his more characteristic propagandist writing in defence of tolerance, I intend to undertake a simultaneous comparison of Voltaire’s representations of the Jews and of the Christians, including their comparable roles as both victims and victimizers, as these appear in both the critical and the ludic works. This analysis, applied in particular to the same chosen texts, should show where the Jewish and the Christian figures are the same and where they differ, and, I hope, reveal whether or not Voltaire’s writing is specifically anti-Jewish, or seeking to attribute praise or blame only where he thinks it is due.

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²⁹ *Des Métaphores obsédantes au Mythe personnel*, p.12, p.32.

Choice of texts

The effort to avoid subjectivity can have only limited success since my social and historical conditioning must partially determine any choice of certain texts, any discarding of others. The critic has to take responsibility for such value judgements. But that choice is also inextricably linked to my simultaneous decision about the method appropriate to such writing; Maureon's networks of interrelated elements of different texts are a meeting-place of psychoanalytic and literary theory, and the theoretical works to which I refer, on racism and related questions, are equally hybrid. Similarly my selection among Voltaire's texts is highly variegated.

My thesis concentrates on two texts that may be viewed as anti-Jewish documents: the *Sermon des cinquante* and the article 'Juifs' – the latter erroneously included by Moland in the *Dictionnaire philosophique*. Reference to these two controversial works is essential as both are so frequently mentioned by those who accuse Voltaire of 'antisemitism'. However, it is necessary to draw attention to the origins of the later article. As Roland Desné points out, it is made up of an amalgamation of different texts, brought together after Voltaire's death; section I being 'Des Juifs' in the *Mélanges* of 1756; section IV being 'Juifs' in the *Questions sur l'Encyclopédie* of 1771; sections II and III were undated fragments found among his papers.

This choice, of course, reflects my intuitive response after reading Voltaire, but is also justifiable on objective grounds. So much of his work centres on the Jews and the Bible that the quantity of relevant material exceeds the possibilities of close analysis; selection, too, is difficult. The process of elimination depends largely on the repetitiousness of many of the anti-Jewish themes, and, in this context, the *Sermon des cinquante* (written clandestinely for friends and acquaintances) and 'Juifs' stand out as containing some of his most virulent and, at times, scatological language. They therefore warrant particular attention, being among the most difficult of Voltaire's anti-Jewish texts.

In addition, my thesis concentrates on Voltaire's allegedly more documentary or 'historical' work, the *Essai sur les mœurs*: here my analysis includes *La Philosophie de l'histoire* because, four years after its publication, 'Voltaire incorporated it in his larger study of universal history' – it appeared as the Introduction to the *Essai*.³⁰ In

³⁰ J.H. Brumfitt, Introduction to *La Philosophie de l'histoire*, p.13.

these texts I hope to find some evidence of Voltaire's more balanced critical writing.

I shall also introduce two fictional works that make only passing reference to the Jews; namely, *La Pucelle d'Orléans* and *Candide*. These may help us to distance ourselves from the often venomous language of the above texts, and allow us to discover the structures of Voltaire's discourse. At the same time we may come closer to the Voltairean imaginary; as Virginia Marino points out, 'Candide is always experiencing his [painful] reality as a dream'.³¹

The juxtaposition of *La Pucelle* and *Candide* can be justified by striking parallels within their differences. First we should note the differences, starting with their publishing destiny. The earlier poem, whose exact date is not known (having been begun perhaps even as early as 1725, and then added to and altered over thirty years or more), like the *Sermon des cinquante*, was passed privately among acquaintances, while *Candide*, even though published anonymously, was soon attributed to the famous author and widely read. They differ in genre and structuring. *Candide* was written as a prose *conte* in thirty generally short chapters, while *La Pucelle* is a poem made up eventually of twenty-one *chants* (varying in length from nearly 300 to nearly 600 lines each). Yet between these two works there is a strong thematic resemblance: war, rape, constant wandering, manipulation, moral deviation, religious persecution and the Inquisition, and in each case the title points to the eponymous central character's emblematic force as a figure of innocent purity in an imperfect world. Jeanne d'Arc, *la Pucelle*, who is chosen by Saint Denis to redeem the French from the assaults of the English, is constantly threatened in her task, not just by her outwardly visible enemies, but also by those concealed within. The success of her mission depends on the maintenance of her virginal status, which frequently comes under attack from the lust of others, and from her own desires. At the same time, within her circle other vulnerable young women, such as Agnès and Dorothee, become prey to the machinations of the supposedly enlightened figures of moral authority. Similarly Candide, repeatedly misled by those who claim to guide him, often self-styled arbiters of philosophical principles and reason, is endlessly driven in search of an unobtainable happiness, and is unable to rest until he arrives at a more realistic and pragmatic appreciation of life's possibilities in his garden on the Propontis.

³¹ 'Dreams and Narrative Coherence in Voltaire', p.93.

Besterman contends that Voltaire did not consider his *contes* to be trivia, but as the writer called all such texts *rogatons*, I hope that the two that I have chosen, through their very marginality relative to other works, and through their ludic character, may indirectly reveal some of the more obscure aspects of his desire to enlighten.³² Voltaire himself links these two works; referring to *La Pucelle*, he writes: 'il y a un chant où tout le monde est fou; chacun des acteurs donne et reçoit cent coups de poing. Voilà l'image de ce monde. Je conclus avec *Candide* qu'il faut cultiver son jardin' (11 August 1764).³³

* * *

Because the *Complete Works* directed by Besterman are still unfinished, I have had to use different primary sources. Wishing wherever possible to draw on latest research, I have referred to the Moland edition published by Garnier Frères (1877-85) only where the more recent series is incomplete. Thus, while references to *La Pucelle*, *Candide*, and *La Philosophie de l'histoire* will be taken from the Voltaire Foundation publications, quotations from the *Sermon des cinquante*, 'Juifs' and the *Essai sur les mœurs* will be according to Moland. The same methodology applies to the other texts cited in this thesis, with the one exception of the *Lettres philosophiques*, where, in order to avoid certain inaccuracies in the Moland text, I refer to the 1964 edition directed by Gustave Lanson and André-Michel Rousseau.

This thesis seeks to show the chronological development of Voltaire's thinking, and to indicate evidence in his *œuvre* for the existence of a period of crisis. I have therefore felt it necessary, where possible, to accompany all quotations by their presumed date of composition. In the case of works such as *Candide* and *La Philosophie de l'histoire*, where the period of writing was of short duration and followed soon afterwards by the first printing, this will be the year of the original publication. As for 'Juifs', here dating will be according to the section from which each extract has been taken. But the *Sermon des cinquante* will not, as in Moland, be dated in line with its publication in 1762, but according to what J. Patrick Lee finds to be the most probable period of writing, 1749-52. Following Ira Wade's research,

³² See *Voltaire*, p.435.

³³ D12045 to Charles Palissot de Montenoy. See also D11808 to Damilaville, 2 April 1764.

Lee writes that, while agreeing ‘that the *Sermon* could have been written in 1749, [and] that it is indeed the fruit of Voltaire’s daily reading of the Bible and Dom Calmet’s commentaries during the *philosophe*’s stay at Cirey, [...] there is no evidence of its existence before 1752’. The situation is even more complicated with *La Pucelle* and the *Essai sur les mœurs* where, because both texts developed over some thirty years, each *chant* or chapter may belong to a very different period. Vercruysse bases his edition of *La Pucelle* on the 1775 version (approved by Voltaire) that was founded on the 1761 edition published in London. Only certain *chants* can be dated with some precision, although Vercruysse discovers two ‘dead’ periods in the development of this work: 1740-55 and 1757-59. As for the main body of the *Essai sur les mœurs*, here dating is according to the Garnier Frères 1963 edition (based on the 1756 version with later additions identified), published under the directorship of René Pomeau.³⁴

* * *

I have linked the examinations of my selected texts (in Chapters 2-6) in a differing and, what might seem, arbitrary order. Although still endeavouring to show the chronological development, here my choice has been made according to what I perceive in each case to be the network of figures; where relevant figures have not been found, texts will be omitted from the discussion.

* * *

For consistency and because we are dealing with a period of orthographic change, eighteenth-century variations in spelling have been standardized – an action which Voltaire himself promoted – and, for clarity, some punctuation has been modernized.

Abbreviations: D = Numbered letter in *Correspondence*
M = Moland edition, Garniers frères, *Œuvres complètes*
SVEC = *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century*
VF = Voltaire Foundation, *Complete Works*

³⁴ ‘The publication of the *Sermon des cinquante*’, p.691; Introduction to *La Pucelle d’Orléans*, p.18.

Chapter 1

The subject and object of tolerance

Sutcliffe's observation that Voltaire's 'intolerance was held in check by his equally deep commitment to ideals of tolerance and cosmopolitanism' can serve as a valuable starting point for the discussion. Before considering in detail our chosen texts, we have to reach some understanding of what is indicated by the terms tolerance and intolerance, and we soon see that this remains as much an enduring problem for Voltaire as for his readers. But in order to address the question of the evidence of these issues in his work, we need to find some kind of working definition for these terms. On the surface level tolerance is a question of accepting the difference of different others, a cause that Voltaire champions. In the *Avis au public sur les parricides imputés aux Calas et aux Sirven*, he condemns persecution of those whose opinions are different, writing: 'En un mot, la tolérance mutuelle est l'unique remède aux erreurs qui pervertissent l'esprit des hommes d'un bout de l'univers à l'autre' (1766). But Voltaire's championing of tolerance is often achieved by his minimization of the differences between people and groups, and by his emphasis on their shared characteristics.³⁵ As J.H. Brumfitt contends: 'tolerance, for Voltaire, is more than a mere acceptance of other peoples' right to their own views. It is also an assertion that these views, though they may differ superficially, are really fundamentally the same.'³⁶ In the *Traité de métaphysique* Voltaire writes:

Quoique ce qu'on appelle vertu dans un climat soit précisément ce qu'on appelle vice dans un autre, et que la plupart des règles du bien et du mal diffèrent comme les langages et les habillements, cependant il me paraît certain qu'il y a des lois naturelles dont les hommes sont obligés de convenir par tout l'univers malgré qu'ils en aient. (1734-37)³⁷

Second, at a deeper level, the acceptance of difference, the reinscription of an excluded particular, refers necessarily to some conception of the universal. Voltaire's reference to the universal predominates as his primary way of attacking intolerance, on the basis of enlightened reason and a universal morality. In *Le Philosophe*

³⁵ *Avis au public*, p.536.

³⁶ Introduction to *La Philosophie de l'histoire*, p.30.

³⁷ *Traité de métaphysique*, pp.475-76.

ignorant, he writes:

la loi fondamentale de la morale agit également sur toutes les nations bien connues. Il y a mille différences dans les interprétations de cette loi, en mille circonstances; mais le fonds subsiste toujours le même, et ce fonds est l'idée du juste et de l'injuste.

Thus, even while describing the Jews of the past as 'une horde barbare, ignorante, superstitieuse, un peuple sanguinaire et usurier', Voltaire contends that nonetheless the Jewish people have 'les mêmes lois fondamentales' (1766).³⁸ He does not tolerate those who deny these universal values in favour of ridiculously brutal and arbitrary man-made relative laws, and he satirizes such thinking in *André Destouches à Siam* (1766). Nor does Voltaire tolerate that specific form of denial of universal morality, found in those who would cancel the religious freedom of others by claiming that their own religion is the one and only. For him, universal morality is rooted solely in the common human understanding of beneficence, doing to another as one would have others do to oneself; it does not belong in the realm of man-made laws and religious dogma. He writes:

La morale n'est point dans la superstition, elle n'est point dans les cérémonies, elle n'a rien de commun avec les dogmes. On ne peut trop répéter que tous les dogmes sont différents, et que la morale est la même chez tous les hommes qui font usage de leur raison. (1767)³⁹

A recent criticism of the Enlightenment has consisted in a relativist rejection of its characteristic reference to the universal, whether that of morality, human qualities, or values. However, to study Voltaire is to see that the stress was fully justified in his day. In that period of scientific development, archeological discovery, geographical exploration, growing categorization and classification, and religious questioning, traditional moral values were reconsidered and more fundamental ones were sought in relation to which a new definition of the transgressive could take shape. Still today, as Ernesto Laclau comments, because 'the demands of various groups will necessarily clash with each other, we have to appeal [...] to some more

³⁸ *Le Philosophe ignorant*, pp.86-87, p.77.

³⁹ 'Morale', p.398.

general principles in order to regulate such clashes'. Laclau states that 'there is no particularism which does not make appeal to such principles in the construction of its own identity'; we have to accept that 'universality is incommensurable with any particularity but cannot, however, exist apart from the particular'. Laclau further underlines the aporia that these comments present by his following remark: '[while] I can defend the right of sexual, racial and national minorities in the name of particularism [...] if particularism is the only valid principle, I have to also accept the rights to self-determination of all kinds of reactionary groups involved in antisocial practices.' The rights of one set of individuals may impinge on the rights of another.⁴⁰ But while critics of the Enlightenment find in its universalism the seeds of modern totalitarianism, the extreme mobility of much of Voltaire's writing already performs certain deconstructive arguments such as these. His modest approach anticipates the postmodern acceptance of the impossibility of finding indisputable solutions, although he never renounces the challenge to search for possible answers. In *A.B.C.* he writes that 'il faut toujours se réserver le droit de rire le lendemain de ses idées de la veille' (1768), and in his letter to d'Argental he states humbly: 'c'est toujours à me corriger que je m'étudie' (20 January 1757).⁴¹

The third area of the understanding of tolerance recognizes that it has to start with self-acceptance, that is with an undoing of the imaginary projection on to the other of perceived weaknesses not acknowledged by the self as its own, and the reintegration of the unwanted qualities in the self. Here the writings of a largely non-confessional writer impose definite limits on what we can say. Voltaire's effort after impartiality might also seem to work against us, and yet I propose that it implies an awareness that subjectivity can get in the way of his project. In the introduction to the *Traité de métaphysique* he indicates the effort it cost him to escape from his site of vision or *episteme*, his desire to shake off his own prejudices: 'je vais tâcher, en étudiant l'homme, de me mettre d'abord hors de sa sphère et hors d'intérêt, et de me défaire de tous les préjugés d'éducation, de patrie, et surtout des préjugés de philosophe' (1734-37). In face of the acknowledged difficulty of achieving unbiased thinking, he commits himself to that unremitting effort.⁴²

⁴⁰ *Emancipation(s)*, p.26, p.34.

⁴¹ *A.B.C.*, p.399; D7129.

⁴² *Traité de métaphysique*, p.418.

In the main, Voltaire believes that all mankind is in need of tolerance and so he writes in 'Tolérance': 'Qu'est-ce que la tolérance? C'est l'apanage de l'humanité. Nous sommes tous pétris de faiblesse et d'erreurs; pardonnons-nous réciproquement nos sottises, c'est la première loi de la nature'. This is later repeated: 'Mais il est plus clair encore que nous devons nous tolérer mutuellement parce que nous sommes tous faibles, inconséquents, sujets à la mutabilité, à l'erreur' (1764).⁴³ We again find this implicit inclusion of the self at the end of his life when he writes: 'Quand on songe à tous les maux qu'a produits le fanatisme, on rougit d'être homme' (1777) and: 'Pardonnons aux hommes, et qu'on nous pardonne' (1777). These statements typify the *collective* character of his recognition of faults from which he does not exempt himself. Avowal takes the form of reference to a class to which the writer himself belongs. In the above examples, this 'subject' class that constitutes the culpable side of a destructive subject-object relation is in fact the whole of humanity: the easiest scope for an avowal, one might say, since it leaves no residue of others who are able to see our failings from outside.⁴⁴

Voltaire's argument at times becomes more personal, in the sense that it depends on a criticism of a less universal class of which he is a member. Irrespective of scholars' doubts surrounding his own religion or lack of it, he saw himself as a member of the European world of Christendom, and so his criticisms of that world include himself. I adopt the term 'Christendom' to differentiate those who are merely inheritors of Christian culture from the Christian religion and its adherents. Speaking as one of Christian culture, he says of Christianity: 'nous avons fait tant de mal par son moyen, que quand nous parlons des autres, nous devons être modestes' (1764).⁴⁵ Discord which always exists in direct opposition to the spirit of tolerance lies at the heart of the Christian world, and so he writes in 'Tolérance':

Cette horrible discorde qui dure depuis tant de siècles est une leçon bien frappante que nous devons mutuellement nous pardonner nos erreurs: la discorde est le grand mal du genre humain, et la tolérance en est le seul remède. (1764)⁴⁶

⁴³ 'Tolérance', VF, p.552, p.566.

⁴⁴ *Prix de la justice*, p.552; *Histoire de l'établissement du christianisme*, p.116 (published 1785).

⁴⁵ 'Religion', p.486.

⁴⁶ 'Tolérance', VF, p.562.

Fanaticism can be prevented only 'en adorant Dieu sans superstition, et en tolérant son prochain' (1777).⁴⁷ But Voltaire emphasizes the paradox that lies at the heart of Christianity, the chasm between the dictates of that religion and the realities of its actions. In *Le Siècle de Louis XIV* he writes:

Il est affreux sans doute que l'Église chrétienne ait toujours été déchirée par ses querelles, et que le sang ait coulé pendant tant de siècles par des mains qui portaient le dieu de la paix.
Cette fureur fut inconnue au paganisme. (1735-52)⁴⁸

In 'Tolérance' he contends: 'De toutes les religions, la chrétienne est sans doute celle qui doit inspirer le plus de tolérance, quoique jusqu'ici les chrétiens aient été les plus intolérants de tous les hommes' (1764).⁴⁹ He repeatedly makes us notice the tension that lies in the dichotomy between the Church's pacific claims and its brutal deeds. He proposes that by inspiring fanaticism and causing social unrest, the merely mistaken actions of the Christians have taken on a criminal dimension. He contends that errors become crimes when they disturb society and inspire fanatics, and it is only by ceasing to be fanatical that men merit tolerance: 'il faut donc que les hommes commencent par n'être pas fanatiques pour mériter la tolérance' (1763).⁵⁰

Here we see the extremism of Voltaire's commitment to fighting intolerance. The champion of tolerance is first and foremost intolerant of intolerance, and of its causes and effects. But at times this thinking introduces the aporia to which Laclau refers; while Voltaire declares that all people deserve to be shown tolerance, in the case of those who abuse the rights of others, he indicates that this privilege should be denied. Although this does not necessarily justify every instance of intolerance in Voltaire's writings, it exposes his awareness of the need for both self-criticism and active resistance. His often vitriolic condemnation of every individual act of fanaticism, whether perpetrated by Christians, Jews or others, rests alongside his impassioned promotion of the rights of all people. Therefore, his contention that the Christians through their brutality have lost their right to the indulgence of others

⁴⁷ *Histoire de l'établissement du christianisme*, p.106.

⁴⁸ *Le Siècle de Louis XIV*, II, 14. Although Voltaire may have begun work on this in 1732, I have dated it according to the most probable period of composition. The complete work was first published in 1752, and for the next twenty or more years Voltaire continued to make corrections to the text.

⁴⁹ 'Tolérance', *VF*, p.558.

⁵⁰ *Traité sur la tolérance*, p.236.

combines with his demand for positive action by his fellow thinkers in the fight against fanaticism. But this acknowledgement of the requirement for self-criticism also relates to his representation of the Jews. Voltaire focuses his attention on, what he represents as, their failure to demonstrate the above-mentioned attributes; he censures them for their supposed denial of ancient Jewish guilt for the 'immoral' messages of the Bible, he condemns the contemporary Jews' alleged unthinking, apathetic acceptance of the 'illogical' truths of the biblical stories, and he accuses them of showing passive indifference in the face of injustice. We shall pay particular consideration to these issues as found in his Jewish discourse, namely the author's demand for a frank and honest self-appraisal by the enlightened Jews of the eighteenth century, and his allegation of apathy among the Jewish people as a whole.

But Voltaire's self-inclusion in a class of guilt identified as Christian rather than as universally human cannot be wholeheartedly enlisted in our attempt to find a humble self-acceptance at the basis of his defence of tolerance towards others. He clearly distinguishes himself, entirely deservedly, as a child of Christian culture endowed with a gift of detachment from his own milieu who undertakes, heroically rather than humbly, to launch that milieu on its own autocritique. Despite his concern as to the possible negative effects of atheism, Voltaire's critical efforts to dismantle religious authoritarianism on all these fronts contributed hugely to the launching of European culture on its modern path of secularization.

Contrary to the common European attitudes in his times and since, Voltaire further contends that Christian Europe has a lesson to learn from its other. This reinscription and conferring of moral status on the other carries the Christian autocritique in Voltaire's works to a higher level. In the 'Avant-propos' to the *Essai sur les mœurs*, he writes that 'en philosophie' we need to look towards the East, 'berceau de tous les arts, et qui a tout donné à l'Occident' (1756), while in 'Philosophe' he refers to the act of fate that – to the 'shame' of the West – caused the East through the teaching of Confucius to practise tolerance and 'à vivre heureux six cents ans avant notre ère vulgaire, dans un temps où tout le septentrion ignorait l'usage des lettres, et où les Grecs commençaient à peine à se distinguer par la sagesse' (1765).⁵¹ He also reverses the representation of benign European colonisation, in that, infected with intolerant passion, 'nous avons empesté ces beaux

⁵¹ *Essai sur les mœurs*, I, 158 (dated 1740 by Moland); 'Philosophe', p.435.

climats' of China, Tonkin and Japan (1772).⁵² This carries forward the thinking of *Le Siècle de Louis XIV*:

Cette fureur des prosélytes est une maladie particulière à nos climats [...]; elle a toujours été inconnue dans la haute Asie. Jamais ces peuples n'ont envoyé de missionnaires en Europe, et nos nations sont les seules qui aient voulu porter leurs opinions, comme leur commerce, aux deux extrémités du globe. (1735-52)⁵³

This dismantling of the prevailing self-other opposition and hierarchy also occurs repeatedly in his representation of the Jews' tolerant attitude towards religious difference. In the *Histoire de l'établissement du christianisme* he mockingly draws attention to the contradiction between the conduct of the Jews of former times and that of contemporary Christians. Despite the differences of belief among the Jewish sects regarding the afterlife, they were able to live together in harmony.

Ce qui peut paraître très singulier aux chrétiens intolérants de nos jours, s'il en est encore, c'est qu'on ne voit pas que les pharisiens et les saducéens, en différant si essentiellement, aient eu entre eux la moindre querelle. (1777)⁵⁴

Voltaire's critique targets a smaller class yet: that part of Christendom which belongs to his own time and place. Here his identification with the culpable group has a more personal tone, with the implication that the collective autocritique that he ceaselessly demands must be proportionately harder for being much closer to home, and for entailing a shaming comparison with the now more tolerant neighbour, England. 'Que nous sommes petits et misérables, en comparaison des Grecs, des Romains, et des Anglais!' (12 April 1764). In his texts he repeatedly draws attention to the fact that whereas in the London Royal Exchange, peoples of different faiths trade peacefully together, in France religious discord lives on in the shadow of the events of Saint Bartholomew's Day.⁵⁵ In the *Traité sur la tolérance* Voltaire places this latter event alongside the savage acts of ancient times:

⁵² 'Tolérance', M.xx, p.525 (originally in *Questions sur l'Encyclopédie*).

⁵³ *Le Siècle de Louis XIV*, II, 83.

⁵⁴ *Histoire de l'établissement du christianisme*, p.52.

⁵⁵ D11821 to Marmontel.

Y a-t-il, dans les relations avérées des persécutions anciennes, un seul trait qui approche de la Saint-Barthélémy, et des massacres d'Irlande? [...] Je le dis avec horreur, mais avec vérité: c'est nous, chrétiens, c'est nous qui avons été persécuteurs, bourreaux, assassins!

(1763)⁵⁶

This same passage links these events to the continuing expression of intolerance, the continuing persecution of religious difference, evident among the people of Toulouse. The savagery of the past persists into the present, and Voltaire belongs to the Catholic France that is still intolerant.

Last, on the most personal level of all, that of his own need for the tolerance of others, Voltaire is mainly silent. His self-recriminations concentrate chiefly on his physical 'feebleness' and ever-growing fragility, his gradual withdrawal from the centre of political affairs. But he goes further when writing to Mademoiselle Bessières following the untimely death of his sister, an event which caused him to reconsider his own sense of worth:

J'ai bien fait des fautes dans le cours de ma vie. Les amertumes et les souffrances qui en ont marqué presque tous les jours ont été souvent mon ouvrage. Je sens le peu que je vau, mes faiblesses me font pitié et mes fautes me font horreur. (15/n.s.26 October 1726)⁵⁷

Later to Thieriot he writes:

être accablé de langueur des années entières, voir tous ses goûts s'anéantir, avoir encore assez de vie pour souhaiter d'en jouir et trop peu de force pour le faire, devenir inutile et insupportable à soi-même, mourir en détail, voilà ce que j'ai souffert et ce qui m'a été plus cruel que toutes les autres épreuves. (c. February 1729)⁵⁸

In his letter to d'Alembert about the article 'Histoire', he blames his ill health for the lack of thoroughness in his work, commenting: 'Pardon, je suis un bavard qui dit ce qu'il aurait dû faire et qui n'a rien fait qui vaille' (9 October 1756), and to Anne

⁵⁶ *Traité sur la tolérance*, p.182.

⁵⁷ D302.

⁵⁸ D344.

Marie Fiquet du Bocage he writes:

Génie vous-même, Madame, je suis un pauvre vieillard moitié poète, moitié philosophe et qui n'est pas à moitié persécuté, quoi qu'il ne dût être qu'un objet de pitié étant surchargé de 84 ans et de 84 maladies et étant très près par conséquent d'aller voir mes anciens maîtres, les Socrates et les Sophocles que j'ai bien mal imités. (2 November 1777)⁵⁹

These avowals, while undoubtedly sincere, do not have the precision of his more general criticisms of groups. However, we are free to question also the silences in his texts:

selon le critère de l'*intentionnalité*, on peut distinguer deux sortes de silence textuel: le silence *volontaire* et le silence *involontaire*, le *vide* sciemment introduit comme stratagème discursif et le *manque* qui, dans le texte, réfère à l'indicible et à l'innommable. Le premier réfère à ce que l'écrivain *ne veut pas dire*, le second à ce qu'il *ne peut pas dire*. (author's italics)⁶⁰

The silences give us an intuition concerning Voltaire's thinking regarding his own sense of victimhood. Ira Wade finds a parallel between the writer's own experiences and the themes found in *Candide*.

It is possible to [...] see in the plot of the conte a series of little incidents in the author's own life, beginning with Candide's illegitimate birth, which Voltaire suspected was his own case, and ending with a disillusioned but determined individual who accepts his lot and cultivates *his* garden, as Voltaire was actually doing at the time he was writing *Candide*. (author's italics)⁶¹

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David Wootton goes much further than Wade, arguing that writing *Candide* allowed the release of the repressed in Voltaire. This *conte*, according to Wootton, marked his coming to terms with early traumatic sexual experiences with the Jesuits,

⁵⁹ D7018; D20876.

⁶⁰ Pierre van den Heuvel, *Parole mot silence*, p.73.

⁶¹ Voltaire and 'Candide', p.299.

and his ambivalent adult sexuality.⁶² Wootton bases his thesis on Voltaire's alleged accusation at Mrs Pope's house in Twickenham against his former school masters, an occasion where according to Jeffrey Barnouw he may have taken English frankness and 'bold speaking' too far, thereby possibly giving 'evidence of a social misperception on Voltaire's part, [...] the result of his playing a role for the English'.⁶³ According to Theodore E.D. Braun the possible misperception – one that 'might have cost him Pope's friendship' – lay in Voltaire's 'anti-religious attitude, coupled with the coarse language that was acceptable in the Parisian circles he frequented, but was not looked on favourably in mixed company in England'.⁶⁴ Whichever may be the correct scholarly interpretation of the reported event, it is a fact that *Candide* inaugurated Voltaire's more openly committed writing, and launched his period of *causes célèbres*. Wootton proposes that the fundamental liberation, in writing this *conte*, lay in finding a form that could assert, through the detour of a wise old woman, that everyone had been raped or violated. If I have correctly understood Wootton's argument, it is that in this way an unbearable inner truth could be made bearable. However, we might object that, while we could hardly expect Voltaire, or anyone else at that time, to be open about a homosexual dimension of their experience when the law forbade it and could punish it brutally, he was nevertheless not completely silent about these things, and we have access to a few documents. What little we know suggests that for most of his life he had integrated his sexual facts well enough, rather than that he found that outlet in *Candide*. But this may be where we need also to distinguish between van Heuvel's 'strategic void' and 'unspeakable absence', the intentional silence about chosen adult experiences and impossible reference to unwanted childhood abuse. In *Prix de la justice et de l'humanité* Voltaire refers to some victims' inability to receive justice for physical abuse suffered in private: 'Il en est du viol comme de l'impuissance; il est certains cas dont les tribunaux ne doivent jamais connaître' (1777). The experiences of characters such as Agnès in *La Pucelle* and *la vieille* in *Candide*

⁶² Wootton quotes the following passage from André Michel Rousseau, *L'Angleterre et Voltaire*, I, 113: 'As he [Voltaire] supped one night with Mr. Pope at Twickenham, he fell into a fit of swearing and of blasphemy about his constitution. Old Mrs. Pope asked him how his constitution came to be so bad at his age. "Oh" (says he) "those d....d Jesuits, when I was a boy, b(u)g...g(a)r'd me to such a degree that I shall never get over it as long as I live"', 'Unhappy Voltaire', p.137.

⁶³ 'The contribution of English to Voltaire's enlightenment', p.81.

⁶⁴ 'Voltaire the English Connection', p.220.

reveal, according to my understanding of Voltaire's discourse, the appositeness of the editors' comment in the Kehl edition: 'Le viol est un véritable crime [...]. C'est une violation de la propriété que chacun doit avoir de sa personne, c'est un outrage fait à la faiblesse par la force.'⁶⁵

Wootton proposes that Voltaire's disgust at Desfontaines, who was accused of pederastic activities with some chimney sweeps, might well have been founded on the latter's being a child molester, rather than his homosexuality.⁶⁶ But whatever the truth, while Voltaire's negative public statements about homosexuality unsurprisingly internalize the anathema unavoidable in that period, they also conform to his characteristic combination of the negative stereotype with the injunction to desist from persecution of that which we deplore: he accordingly took up the cause of Desfontaines.⁶⁷ Therefore what did happen in the writing of *Candide*? As Wootton's main point convinces us, even if we question the specific psychical determinants of the moment of release of energy available, after *Candide*, for important work, we can readily concede that that moment occurred. I would prefer to adapt Wootton's interpretation, taking into my study of Voltaire that aspect of it which strikingly fits the structure I have been defining, whereby he advances secularization, the diminution of religious authority, by launching his own society on its autocritique, and does this by himself criticizing whole classes to which he, Voltaire, belongs. This structure takes on greater importance when we can see that in *Candide* the universalization of sexual victimhood literally includes the writer's self. It shows us that the effort to get outside the limitations of his own viewpoint and to universalize his critique for the sake of impartiality takes the same path as a certain integration of his subjecthood in the social space.

The two areas of Voltaire's sexuality potentially susceptible of social opprobrium are his affair with his niece, Madame Denis, and his possible relationships with known homosexuals. As for incest, Besterman in a comment relating to Voltaire's satirical passage in *La Défense de mon oncle* (1767) has

⁶⁵ *Prix de la justice*, p.567 including note 1.

⁶⁶ Thelma Morris writes: 'Depuis quelque temps des plaintes étaient déposées au sujet des mauvaises mœurs de l'abbé qui, disait-on, corrompait nombre de jeunes gens.' *L'Abbé Desfontaines et son rôle dans la littérature de son temps*, p.38.

⁶⁷ Morris comments that Voltaire 'est intervenu très activement auprès de la police et de la cour pour sauver Desfontaines, quoiqu'il soupçonnât ce dernier d'être l'auteur d'une édition subreptice et fautive de la *Henriade* dans laquelle il avait inséré des vers de sa façon.' *L'Abbé Desfontaines et son rôle dans la littérature de son temps*, p.41.

pointed out the contemporary thinking.

I must make it clear that in the eighteenth century and in Roman Catholic countries incest was not and is not judged with Calvinist severity. Voltaire once said, with perfect accuracy, that 'a man can marry his niece by permission of the pope, for a fee which I believe is normally forty thousand écus, including the petty cash. I have always heard it said that it cost monsieur de Montmartel only 80,000 francs. I know some who have gone to bed with their nieces much more cheaply than that'.⁶⁸

In 'Des Lois' (1764) Voltaire satirically introduces the incest taboo into his critique of the relativity of social laws; he contrasts natural law with man-made laws, and ridicules the arbitrary nature of the latter. He had already written in this vein in the *Traité de métaphysique* (1734-37), drawing attention to differences in attitudes to adultery and homosexuality around the world, and contrasting these relative laws to the universal condemnation of falsity, lying and deceit. But, when studying his figures, we shall also see how, alongside his demolition of social conventions attached to non-conforming sexual behaviour, Voltaire repeatedly condemns what he significantly calls the 'spiritual incest' perpetrated by religious authorities against their flocks. However, for our study these issues raise still further questions. Incest is a theme which constantly reappears in Voltaire's writing, and frequently underpins his critique of the Jewish texts, an emphasis that becomes even more relevant when viewed in the light of Sander L. Gilman's statement: 'The implicit charge of incest stood at the center of the understanding of the pathology of the Jew.' Gilman discovers among Christians a critical reaction to the Jews' endogamous marriages that leads to a mental construct of the 'biological inheritance of the Jew, an inheritance tainted by the Jew's incestuous inbreeding'.⁶⁹ Bensimon, going further, finds all such thinking to be typical of the antisemite: 'c'est sans doute une constante du propos antisémite [...] d'avoir une coloration sexuelle marquée'.⁷⁰

While Voltaire does not publicly comment on homosexuality with reference to himself, in so far as it concerns others, it is an issue whose paradoxes obviously strike him, and one which again repeatedly marks his Jewish critique. In 'Amour

⁶⁸ Voltaire, pp.270-71.

⁶⁹ *Inscribing the Other*, p.125, p.23.

⁷⁰ 'Un anti-sémite rationaliste: Voltaire', p.21.

nommé socratique' (1764), he condemns pederasty which preys on innocent youth, but shows understanding for the weakness of the young and, by implication, the beautiful. But homosexual acts carried out between the older and, he suggests, coarser are described as 'a disgusting abomination'; here he separates the physical and the emotional, denying a place for love in the relations between mature adult men. Homosexual relations are practised and 'natural', albeit 'un attentat infâme contre la nature' in that they exclude the possibility of procreation.⁷¹

Rictor Norton illustrates a tension in Christian thinking as regards so-called illicit sexual behaviour. While pointing to the accusations of sodomy or fornication levelled at this time against the Jesuits and other members of the Church (a figure often found in the works of Voltaire and his predecessors), Norton explains how the religious authorities were prepared to overlook the sins of adultery if they resulted in childbirth, and how anti-homosexual prejudice was 'nourished by the Roman Catholic attitude professing the sanctity of procreation' – a paradox that, through reversal, Voltaire further problematizes by emphasizing how Christian chastity is in itself non-productive.⁷²

E.M. Langille in his study into 'allusions to homosexuality' in *Candide*, suggests that Voltaire 'was not the least indifferent' to all such 'so-called perversities', and this critic contends that, 'depending on his mood, depending on the public he was addressing, we see him malign the "sodomite", or defend him, or do both at once'. Langille summarizes therefore with the comment that the homosexual satire in *Candide* is just one more in a long list of assaults Voltaire levies on the whole gamut of human follies and failings'.⁷³ But I propose that there is a still further fundamental element behind Voltaire's argument. In the *Prix de la justice et de l'humanité*, even while calling the homosexual act an *ordure*, he declares that it is 'plus faite pour être ensevelie dans les ténèbres de l'oubli que pour être éclairée par les flammes des bûchers aux yeux de la multitude' (1777) – a telling reference to the much hated form of execution that appears so often in his texts. Voltaire's representation of all such sexual practices form part of his discourse regarding victims and victimizers, which leads us to understand that for him the essential point

⁷¹ 'Amour nommé socratique', p.329, p.328.

⁷² *Mother Clap's Molly House*, p.125.

⁷³ 'Allusions to homosexuality in Voltaire's *Candide*', p.63.

is that such secret relationships between willing adults are better private, a matter for tolerance and certainly not deserving of persecution. His various public statements, whatever their mode – protective, defensive or militant – imply an inner acceptance of his own homosexual aspect, for all their generalizing impersonal nature.⁷⁴ His need to question his own origins and his enduring rage at his abusive teachers may well form part of the dynamic of his propagandist writing on behalf of victims, and it may prove illuminating to ask how they do so. I shall explore the suggestion that Voltaire's sexual history intersects, at an emancipatory moment, with the history of the evolution of his *œuvre*, the creation of a life of propaganda as a literary genre, fragmentary, highly mobile, and vast.⁷⁵

* * *

In a different way, Desné, too, discovers in the writer's thinking on tolerance three levels that gradually reduce down from the universal to the personal. Into this system, Desné integrates Voltaire's attitude towards the Jews, describing it as one displaying an 'antijudaïsme obsessionnel et outrancier'. But Desné then softens his criticism and points to the fact that Voltaire by attacking the biblical Jews as 'le peuple le plus intolérant et le plus cruel de toute l'antiquité' (1764), in fact incorporates them in the universal: 'le procès du judaïsme s'inscrit donc dans une vision de l'histoire et n'est pas isolé d'une lutte générale, constante et cohérente, contre la barbarie.' Desné then continues, showing how Voltaire further reduces the field of his attack and condemns the Christians as 'les plus intolérants de tous les hommes' (1764). Finally he indicates a level of Voltaire's criticism that comes even closer to the self; he quotes the latter's bitter comment that 'il n'y a point au fond de nation plus cruelle que la française' (1769). These statements reveal that, while Voltaire's condemnation against each group is total, and while the biblical Jews are included in brutal universal humanity, his assault against alleged Jewish savagery is

⁷⁴ Thelma Morris points to how Abbé Théro (who first denounced Desfontaines to the police) claimed that there was a similarity between the actions of the Abbé and Voltaire himself: 'En effet l'intervention de Voltaire souleva une protestation de Théro, qui l'accusait du même crime lequel Desfontaines avait été mis en prison.' *L'Abbé Desfontaines et son rôle dans la littérature de son temps*, p.42.

⁷⁵ *Prix de la justice*, p.570.

moderated by being particularized in, what is for him, a ‘fictional’ past.⁷⁶ Unlike his comments on the Christians that are couched in the present tense, his references to Jewish acts of cruelty show that they belong to antiquity. I therefore find that Voltaire does not condemn the Jews of the eighteenth century, does not see them as personally involved in or responsible for past brutality, but just mocks them as followers of a foolish, immoral and ‘absurd’ religious tradition – here (for Voltaire) they are ‘today’ responsible only for their continued ‘illogical’ thinking, one that makes them deserving solely of the ridicule with which he portrays them. While he dismisses the Jewish populace as irrelevant, and while at times he goes so far as to *commend* certain contemporary Jews as enlightened, his mockery against all followers of the Judaic religious tradition ever remains, becoming, as with other groups, its most severe against those who, he considers, should be best able to resist foolish thinking. But even this sarcastic treatment is not limited to the Jews alone. When he describes the Judaic custom whereby during the ceremony of circumcision the Jews leave a chair ready for Elijah who is expected to accompany the Messiah at the Last Coming, he indicates that a comparable ‘superstition’ has passed to other faiths, to the ‘prophets’ of the Cévennes, and to the *convulsionnaires* of Paris (1761). Voltaire thus associates Jewish ‘irrational’ thinking with that of all mankind, even of those fellow countrymen and Christian coreligionaries of his own day.⁷⁷ Considering that ridicule can be a highly effective device to undermine the status of any religious or political authority, he writes to Count Algarotti: ‘Je fais ce que je peux pour rendre les Jésuites et les Jansénistes ridicules’ (1 May 1761).⁷⁸

But at the same time this introduces us to a fundamental distinction that we find exists between Voltaire’s discourse relating to the Jews and that representing the Christians. Sometimes the faults of the latter are marked by such excessive brutality or intolerance that mockery is inappropriate. This, as he writes to d’Alembert, 23 July 1766, is the situation as regards the recent La Barre affair, the case of the young *chevalier* from Abbeville, who, on a charge of blasphemy, was tortured and publicly executed; his body was then burnt. Here, for Voltaire, the seriousness of the Church’s attested brutality far exceeds that of the Jews’ ‘fabled’

⁷⁶ *Inventaire Voltaire*, p.764. The quotations are taken from ‘Tolérance’ (1764), VF, pp.556-57, p.558, and ‘Torture’ (1769), p.572.

⁷⁷ *Essai sur les mœurs*, III, 143.

⁷⁸ D9761.

savage deeds of the Bible; in such instances the actions of the Christians render all humour out of place and it is no longer the time for laughter. While the 'modern-day' Jews do not deserve the intolerance of others, and their actions may be mocked, the Christians, whose intolerance is at times intolerable, have repeatedly committed actions whose nature goes beyond the bounds of ridicule.

* * *

So, while not denying the anti-Jewish tone of his discourse, which would be impossible, my purpose is to reveal the methods with which Voltaire dismantles his own arguments, and thereby show that his championing of tolerance and his anti-Jewish language do not simply represent a contradiction within his thinking, whatever our present-day assessment of their coexistence may be. But at times our analysis of Voltaire's discourse is complicated by the highly sarcastic tone that he adopts, one that with hindsight may appear particularly problematic. In 'Tolérance', while declaring himself a friend of the Jews, he scornfully refers to the supposedly ridiculous or revolting episodes of the Judaic tradition; the donkey of Balaam, the (according to Voltaire's interpretation) coprological supper of Ezechiel, the whale's swallowing of Jonah, the serpent's temptation of Eve, etc. Thus mockingly he welcomes his 'brother, the Jew' to dinner, provided that he does not take it into his head to follow the ancient practices of his biblical forebears (1772). But I suggest that here the highly derisive tone adopted denies all possibility of similar events occurring among the contemporary Jews. Rather, by the very excessive nature of the examples that he has chosen, once more I propose that Voltaire points solely to the foolishness of those who can still hold such 'fables' to be sacred.⁷⁹ We might note that almost identical episodes appear in 'Miracles' (1771) where Voltaire defines such paranormal events as those that 'have never happened and will never happen'.⁸⁰

Similarly in the difficult section IV of 'Juifs', Voltaire again ridicules the Jews for their adherence to what is, for him, a nonsensical religion. Sardonicly declaring himself to be their servant, their friend, their brother, reassuring them of his compassion, and begging them not to accuse him of ill will, he reiterates the

⁷⁹ 'Tolérance', M.xx, p.526 (originally in the *Questions sur l'Encyclopédie*).

⁸⁰ 'Miracles', M.xx, p.82 (originally in the *Questions sur l'Encyclopédie*).

savage or 'absurd' events of the Bible; the slaughter of the Jews, the varying and unjust punishments meted out to the people. Sarcastically he makes reference to the putting to death of fifty thousand and seventy Jews who dared to look at the Ark, 'tandis que ceux qui l'avaient prise si insollement à la guerre en furent quittes pour des hémorroïdes et pour offrir à vos prêtres cinq rats d'or et cinq anus d'or'. Other problems arise for the modern critic in Voltaire's apparently dismissive conclusion where he writes: 'Vous êtes des animaux calculants; tâchez d'être des animaux pensants' (1771).⁸¹ Poliakov sees this as a 'comparaison entre le chrétien qui pense et le Juif qui calcule', a comparison that 'anticipe l'à-priori de l'antisémitisme raciste, décrétant la supériorité de l'intelligence créatrice des chrétiens [...] sur le stérile intellect des Juifs'.⁸² But in this case Voltaire's comment makes no reference to the Christians, and instead concentrates solely on how the Jews might imitate the peaceable nature of the Banians and Guèbres. Moreover, although he often mocks the Jews of the past for their alleged failure to engage in the arts and sciences, Voltaire indicates in the *Traité sur la tolérance* that a practical/financial shrewdness is not incompatible with good citizenship: he declares that the requests by 'heretics' in sixteenth century France to be absolved from Catholic taxation were founded on their claim to be 'plutôt bons calculateurs que mauvais sujets' (1763).⁸³ And I also suggest that we might discover a still softer intent behind Voltaire's argument when we consider two other passages. In the *Sermon prêché à Bâle* he writes: 'Êtres pensants, ne redoutez plus rien de la superstition' (1768), and in the *Histoire de l'établissement du christianisme* he declares: 'La superstition change tellement les hommes en bêtes' (1777). For Voltaire, therefore, in order to qualify as fully thinking human beings, all people must reject superstition.⁸⁴

We might further help our reading of such negative texts regarding the Jews, by relating such passages to others that address the Christians. During his involvement in the 'Bélissaire affair' in which he defended the arguments put forward by fellow *Encyclopédiste* Marmontel against intolerance, Voltaire wrote his satirical *Lettre de l'archevêque de Canterbury à M. l'archevêque de Paris*. Here, in

⁸¹ 'Juifs', p.532, p.541.

⁸² *Histoire de l'antisémitisme*, p.106.

⁸³ *Traité sur la tolérance*, p.142.

⁸⁴ *Sermon prêché à Bâle*, p.590; *Histoire de l'établissement du christianisme*, p.112.

the 'Post-Scriptum', the English archbishop writes: 'Quand vous écrirez à l'évêque de Rome, faites-lui, je vous prie, mes compliments; j'ai toujours beaucoup de considération pour lui, en qualité de frère.' Then, having mockingly listed the Pope's troubles, the kicking received by his mule, the buffeting of his barge, his violent indigestion from eating Parmesan cheese, he concludes that although his father was 'a good banker', 'le fils n'entend pas son compte' (1768).⁸⁵ For Voltaire, criticism can be achieved by scornful sarcasm, and thus he writes: 'On digère tout, hors le mépris' (1771). So I find that the agenda for the writer is always the same; all those who are too self-important, all those who hold to – what he finds to be – foolish religious beliefs or practices, need to be ridiculed. His mockery is not reserved just for the Jewish people.⁸⁶

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Schwarzbach rightly observes that Voltaire's discourse 'n'exprime aucune chaleur, aucune amitié' towards the Jews – even though he was on good terms with certain Jewish individuals.⁸⁷ Mervaud also denies the presence of sympathy for them on the part of the author and she writes: 'Honte donc aux chrétiens, mais peu de sympathie pour ces malheureux persécutés.'⁸⁸ However, in the light of the attitudes of the times, the texts also give evidence of a non-typically eighteenth-century polemic in favour of the Jews, and I would endorse Sylviane Albertan-Coppola's statement that, while not exempt from the contemporary prejudices, 'Voltaire voue aux Juifs une profonde bienveillance en tant que victimes de l'intolérance, et ce au même titre que d'autres persécutés tels que les protestants ou les jansénistes'.⁸⁹ Where he saw good in the Jews – even if this was not often – he acknowledged it, and Robert Wokler contends that Voltaire 'seldom turned his acerbic wit upon any individual Jew, and he was conspicuously much less kind to Rousseau'.⁹⁰ Even though we shall have to consider later the charge often levelled against Voltaire of both failing to see

⁸⁵ *Lettre de l'archevêque de Canterbury*, p.579.

⁸⁶ 'Philosophe', M.xx, p.202 (originally in the *Questions sur l'Encyclopédie*).

⁸⁷ 'Voltaire et les Juifs: bilan et plaidoyer', p.85.

⁸⁸ *Le 'Dictionnaire philosophique' de Voltaire*, p.87.

⁸⁹ 'L'Abbé Guénée, "Secrétaire Juif" contre Voltaire à l'occasion du *Traité sur la tolérance*', p.101.

⁹⁰ 'Multiculturalism and Ethnic Cleansing in the Enlightenment', p.78.

the Jews as individuals and group stereotyping them, Wokler's claim here needs consideration. In his letters, Voltaire calls Rousseau, his fellow *philosophe*, an animal and a madman: 'le plus méchant fou qui ait jamais existé, un singe qui mord ceux qui lui donnent à manger est plus raisonnable et plus humain que lui' (to Damilaville, 3 November 1766), and 'un fou et un plat monstre d'orgueil' (to d'Alembert, c.10 August 1766).⁹¹ He implies satirically to the Comte and Comtesse d'Argental that he should be sent to the colonies (5 November 1766), and, again to Damilaville, claims that Rousseau 'mériterait au moins le pilori s'il ne méritait pas les Petites Maisons' (12 November 1766).⁹² To Helvétius he indicates the danger presented to the *philosophes*' cause by 'ce Judas de la troupe sacrée' (27 October 1766), and to d'Alembert refers to their 'faux frère Rousseau' (13 June 1766), later commenting:

C'est bien dommage encore une fois que Jean Jacques soit un fou et un méchant fou, sa conduite a fait plus de tort aux belles lettres et à la philosophie que le vicaire savoyard ne leur fera jamais de bien. (23 July, 1766)⁹³

These statements may go some way towards revealing the less personal reasons behind Voltaire's antipathy for Rousseau, his concern for the possible damage his fellow writer might do to the *Encyclopédie*'s cause. But, for this thesis, the essential point of Voltaire's whole argument against intolerance and persecution appears in his letter to Damilaville, where he compares Rousseau to the Jews: 'Je pense sur Rousseau comme sur les Juifs; ce sont des fous, mais il ne faut pas les brûler' (2 June 1766).⁹⁴ This comment links closely with the passage regarding the Jews that closes the first section of 'Juifs': '*Il ne faut pourtant pas les brûler*' (1756: Moland's italics).⁹⁵ Even in his most vitriolic and uncontrolled texts against what he sees as the unreasoning Jews, Voltaire does not condone the persecution of them; he rails against the treatment they suffered from the Inquisition, and never, as many did at the time, and have since done, denies their claim to the rights of all human beings,

⁹¹ D13646; D13485.

⁹² D13652; D13669.

⁹³ D13626; D13345; D13440.

⁹⁴ D13336.

⁹⁵ 'Juifs', p.521.

‘dont on ne doit dépouiller personne’ (1761).⁹⁶ Later we shall investigate this further when also considering Voltaire’s dual understanding of what denotes true humanity – the biological dimension that is universal, and the moral dimension that he judges to be generally absent in a large variety of social groups. He underlines the distinction between ‘humankind’ or ‘human nature’ and ‘l’âme la plus humaine, la plus sensible, qui aura joint le plus de justice à cette vertu’ (1777).⁹⁷

The Jews, however, like others such as Rousseau, belong to the human fraternity and so in the *Traité sur la tolérance* he writes:

je vous dis qu’il faut regarder tous les hommes comme nos frères. Quoi! mon frère le Turc?
mon frère le Chinois? le Juif? le Siamois? Oui, sans doute; ne sommes-nous pas tous enfants
du même père, et créatures du même Dieu? (1763)⁹⁸

While not denying the possible tensions within such a sweeping statement, we can affirm that Voltaire promotes a way of thinking that contradicts the common attribution to the Enlightenment of polarized, Eurocentric notions. In ‘Tolérance’ he writes: ‘Il est clair que tout particulier qui persécute un homme, son frère, parce qu’il n’est pas de son opinion, est un monstre’ (1764).⁹⁹ Aggression, not ignorance, is inhuman, as the tolerance of the ancient Greek and Roman sects reveals:

Toutes se trompaient, et nous en sommes bien fâchés; mais toutes étaient paisibles, et c’est ce qui nous confond; c’est ce qui nous condamne; c’est ce qui nous fait voir que la plupart des
raisonneurs d’aujourd’hui sont des monstres, et que ceux de l’antiquité étaient des hommes. (1748-51)¹⁰⁰

The same thinking appears in his letter to Marmontel: ‘Il y aura toujours en France une espèce de sorciers vêtus de noir qui s’efforceront de changer les hommes en bêtes; mais c’est à vous et à vos amis à changer les bêtes en hommes’ (28 January 1764). The abuse of reason is more violent than unreason. The oppressor, not the

⁹⁶ *Essai sur les mœurs*, II, 163.

⁹⁷ *Prix de la justice*, p.533, note 1 (de Voltaire).

⁹⁸ *Traité sur la tolérance*, p.247.

⁹⁹ ‘Tolérance’, VF, p.557.

¹⁰⁰ *Lettres philosophiques*, I, 212.

oppressed, lacks humanity. This reversal of the civilized-savage opposition characterizes every instance of intolerance to which Voltaire refers.¹⁰¹

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Anne-Marie Mercier Faivre describes a progression from a tolerance which is 'passive' – 'celle qui laisse faire ce qu'elle désapprouve' – to an 'acceptation, qui pourrait aller jusqu'à une compréhension de l'autre', and she marks this change in the actions taken by Voltaire regarding the Protestants. She points to the non-involvement of many thinkers of the period in the problems experienced by the Huguenots in France following the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes (1685). Thus, while referring to certain comparable propagandist texts written by Protestants, she describes the *Traité sur la tolérance* as a unique example of a work by a non-Protestant writer, an 'œuvre d'un homme qui parle pour des hommes qui pensent différemment de lui, qui met donc la notion de tolérance en acte dans sa propre personne'. She indicates that Voltaire became concerned in the Protestant cause, in spite of personal differences of opinion, and (we might add) in spite of his bitter disapprobation for their instances of intolerance. In his texts, therefore, he unites the Protestants with all mankind as both victimizers and victims, thus presenting them as part of flawed humanity, but also as equally deserving of the tolerance of others. Mercier Faivre emphasizes the self-critical element of Voltaire's work and the way it addresses the importance of the attitude of the individual, his personal responsibility in the fight for tolerance; she shows that in the *Traité sur la tolérance*, writing as a member of Christian Europe, Voltaire 'n'accuse pas tant le despote [...], le clergé français [...] ou les Toulousains [...], que l'homme et principalement l'homme européen et chrétien'.¹⁰²

Isabelle Brouard-Arends points to how 'le protestant importait peu à Voltaire', and Anne Richardot comments that Voltaire was 'often hostile' towards the Protestants.¹⁰³ She declares that he was initially 'indifferent' to the execution of Jean Calas who was charged, on apparently specious evidence, with murdering his son to

¹⁰¹ D11667.

¹⁰² 'Les traités sur la tolérance', p.626, pp.613-14, p.626.

¹⁰³ *Lectures de Voltaire*, p.11, p.123.

prevent him from converting to the Catholic faith, and Simon Harvey reinforces this view with the remark that Voltaire's first reaction to the news was 'shockingly offhand'.¹⁰⁴ Voltaire's texts often imply a link between the Protestants and the Jews, a link reflected in the contemporary representation of – what increasing became known as – the *Non Catholic Church*. As explained by Didier Poton: 'Cette période de résistance et de restauration des églises réformées porte le nom de "Désert". Ce terme fait référence à la fois à l'errance du peuple juif dans le désert du Sinaï et aux lieux désertiques.' Poton also describes how, in certain areas, there was among Catholics a fear 'de l'émigration de populations indispensables à l'économie', a tension that Voltaire often refers to in his texts by pointing to the paradoxical treatment received by both Protestants and Jews – even though the two groups are excluded from certain practices and occupations, on occasion they are sought after for their services.¹⁰⁵

However, we must also consider Pomeau's views regarding Voltaire's attitudes to the Protestants. For him, the writer's move to Switzerland indicated a certain affinity with this group, his possible belief that those Protestants who were enlightened, by their rejection of earlier dogma, could be found 'à mi-chemin du déisme'. But Pomeau then goes on to show that Voltaire eventually came to see these same people as *sociniens honteux* who through weakness were unable to reject Christianity in its entirety and to 'aller jusqu'au bout de leur pensée'. Thus, for Pomeau, Voltaire's later campaigns became marked not so much by personal feeling or mutual understanding, as by pragmatic propagandism for his philosophic cause: 'La tolérance des protestants n'est qu'une étape, ou un moyen. Voltaire entend profiter du succès pour régler son compte à l'infâme.'¹⁰⁶

Graham Gargett, pointing to the 'complex' nature of Voltaire's attitude towards the Protestants and Protestantism, also finds a pragmatism in his actions. He contends: 'C'est la possibilité d'influencer non seulement l'opinion publique en général mais aussi la politique du gouvernement qui explique la façon dont il s'exprime sur les protestants.' He finds that 'si Voltaire condamne la Révocation de l'Edit de Nantes et déplore la perte d'hommes et de ressources qui en résulta, il

¹⁰⁴ *Treatise on Tolerance*, p.xii.

¹⁰⁵ 'La monarchie et les protestants en France au XVIII^e siècle', p.45, p.54.

¹⁰⁶ *La Religion de Voltaire*, p.292, p.298, p.335.

montre souvent assez peu de compassion envers les huguenots eux-mêmes'. But Gargett then explains how, from the time of his involvement with the Calas case, Voltaire begins to understand better their situation. He discovers 'dans ses contemporains protestants des citoyens utiles et paisibles qui souffrent pour les péchés de leurs ancêtres, victimes d'une législation injuste et périmée qu'il faut aider à tout prix'.¹⁰⁷ Therefore, in the *Traité sur la tolérance*, while emphasizing that he is not demanding that they should be given immense privileges, Voltaire declares that the State should 'laisser vivre un peuple paisible', and should grant these same people the rights of citizenship (1763). Again his argument hinges on the duality of rights and duties; all people have a right to be treated with tolerance, provided that they do no harm to others.¹⁰⁸

John Renwick states that 'the Protestant cause, leading up to 1762, was gathering momentum' and that 'there was [...] a growing body of diverse writings [...] that demonstrate that the political, religious and moral demands of toleration (fast becoming an ideal of behaviour) had determined proponents'. He contends that a textual examination of the period dating from about 1716 'to the eve of the Calas case [...] will show that Voltaire's thoughts on toleration tend to be *reactive* rather than what they would become: positively *pro-active*'. In the discourse before 1762, according to Renwick, 'it has yet to become an attainable ideal linked with the principle of human freedom'.¹⁰⁹

Monique Cottret has also outlined the development in the understanding of tolerance from a negative seventeenth-century attitude, a shutting of one's eyes to what one does not like, to a more positive 'modern' thinking, the extending of respect and benevolence, the pleading *for* someone or something. For her too it was Voltaire's involvement in the Calas affaire that marked this change to a more activist connotation for the term; no longer 'il dit le mal, le doute, l'indifférence', but instead 'il dit le bien, la patience, la bienveillance'.¹¹⁰

J. Patrick Lee makes a further connection between areas of Voltaire's discourse on victims, and he points to how the publishing of the *Sermon des cinquante* in 1762 came about at the same moment as Voltaire became interested in

¹⁰⁷ 'Voltaire, les protestants et le protestantisme', p.33, p.26, p.29.

¹⁰⁸ *Traité sur la tolérance*, p.155.

¹⁰⁹ 'Theory becomes action', p.585, p.583.

¹¹⁰ 'La tolérance état des lieux', p.19.

the Calas affair. He shows how in his correspondence with Damilaville the writer uses language similar to that adopted in the *Sermon*, with the emphasis on the allegedly 'abominable' and 'absurd'. In this case Voltaire writes: 'On est toujours indigné ici de l'absurde et abominable jugement de Toulouse' (17 April 1762).¹¹¹ Lee also quotes Voltaire's letter to d'Alembert where, having referred to the public reading of the *Sermon*, the *philosophe* then summarizes with the comment: 'la raison va grand train. Écrasez l'infâme' (18 January 1763).¹¹² But while Lee's objective in his paper is to define the creative and publishing history of the *Sermon des cinquante*, for the present discussion the more important question is that of the relationship between this work and Voltaire's later involvement in the *causes célèbres*. One aim of this study is to discover whether or not the *Sermon* should be described solely as the product of a period of uncontrolled writing, that is whether or not Voltaire's subsequent publication of what was originally a private vituperative attack against the allegedly reprehensible Jews (and Christians) is integral to his drive for the promulgation of tolerance for all victims. The positive demand in his letter to d'Alembert for the propagation of universal consideration and understanding, framed in the context of the *Sermon*, may help us to discover the sincerity of Voltaire's movement towards the more 'modern' spirit of tolerance, his movement away from a vitriolic particularized excoriation of the allegedly savage and despised Jews and Christians, to the active promotion of *all* peoples' rights.

Laclau, again pointing to the aporia that exists at the heart of the concept of tolerance, writes:

If what I tolerate is what I morally approve (or, at the very least, that *vis-à-vis* which I am morally neutral) I am not *tolerating* anything. At the most, I am redefining the limits of a perfectly intolerant position. Tolerance only starts when I morally disapprove of something and, however, I accept it. (author's italics)¹¹³

By his reference to the moral, Laclau here brings us back to the insoluble problem of how we determine the tolerable and the intolerable. But this comment also reminds us of the tension that lies at the core of Voltaire's discourse, the problems he faced

¹¹¹ D10417.

¹¹² D10922; see 'The publication of the *Sermon des cinquante*', p.693.

¹¹³ 'Deconstruction, Pragmatism, Hegemony', p.51.

personally when calling for universal tolerance. I propose that Voltaire constantly strives to promote the tolerant treatment of all victims, including the Jews, and since tolerance, by its very definition, indicates an embracing of that which the individual finds different and hard to accept, we, the readers, might concede that his championing of the Jewish cause, precisely because it brings his own ambivalence to the surface of his discourse, represents in that respect the embodiment of the real spirit of tolerance. We shall therefore attempt to show that apart from the presence in Voltaire's Jewish discourse of the earlier spirit of a 'passive' acceptance of difference, there also irrefutably exists evidence of an ever-growing and more 'modern' form of tolerance, one that includes a demand for the promotion of a more active programme in favour of the Jews.

While, with reference to all groups, Voltaire aims his criticisms at what he perceives as definitely intolerant behaviour, either directly detrimental to the good of others, or conducive to harm, in the case of the ancient Jews he discovers an added difficulty in any critical analysis; in *La Philosophie de l'histoire* he sets out the problem of forming a factually based assessment, since, for him, the only 'historical' records on which to undertake a study consist of 'fictional' biblical texts. All his judgements have to rely on these accounts which, he contends, relate the fantastic, the impossible, the immoral and the brutal.

As most religious groups, including the Christians, have presumed factual records of positive achievements against which to balance negative judgements, Voltaire's analyses of these appear to entail proportionally less condemnatory criticism than that which he directs at the Jews. But, as this thesis endeavours to show, his excoriation of all intolerance, regardless of its provenance, is fundamentally egalitarian, indeed universal, and I propose, contrary to the opinion of several critics, that his attack on the Jews no more cloaks his criticism of the Christians than his condemnation of the Christians cloaks his criticism of the Jews. The open virulence of his discourse against both groups goes a long way towards refuting the suggestion of such selective concealment of his opinions. I rather find concealment in his frequent denial of authorship. His correspondence attests to this denial, often attributing to others authorship of his own works: he indicates that *La Pucelle* belongs to Abbé Trithème (to Charles Palissot de Montenoy, 11 August 1764), repeatedly credits others with the writing of the *Dictionnaire philosophique*, which he describes as 'ce malheureux *portatif* qu'on s'obstine à m'imputer' (to d'Argental, 20 October 1764), and accuses Rousseau of 'unjustly calumniating' him with the charge of having written the *Sermon des cinquante* (to d'Argental, 10 January 1765).¹¹⁴ Criticizing the Church was indeed dangerous at the time, and when writing to Diderot Voltaire refers to the problems and risks: 'on est obligé de mentir, et encore est-on persécuté, pour n'avoir pas menti assez' (26 June 1758).¹¹⁵ His letter to the Comte and Comtesse d'Argental indicates how any criticism of the Bible is

¹¹⁴ D12045; D12155; D12302.

¹¹⁵ D7768.

threatened with censorship and it points to the need for deviousness in his method of attack. 'Il n'est pas difficile de donner aux proscriptions hébraïques un tour qui désarme la censure théologique. Ce n'est point la vérité qui nous perd, c'est la manière de la dire' (22 June 1766). His criticisms are repeatedly addressed to Jews and Christians in turn, indicating that he does not seek to camouflage his anti-Christian feelings under a cover of anti-Jewishness. Only where the accusation relates to both may the criticism of one be read as an indirect criticism of the other.¹¹⁶

Schwarzbach relates the attack on the Jews to that on the Christians and contends that the Jews were not Voltaire's main objective but only 'secondary targets'. He considers that since, in his view, nearly every Voltairean attack against the Jews is immediately followed by an analysis of the New Testament, we may find in his work evidence of the tension that defines the Judeo-Christian relationship. But, although Voltaire reiterates the historical emergence of Christianity out of Judaism, and we accordingly find evidence in his writing of the implication of ancient Jewish causality in the activities of the Christians, he does not appear to exonerate the latter from full, *personal* blame for their fanatical behaviour, the more reprehensible than that of the biblical Jews for occurring in the supposedly more enlightened contemporary world. Thus, taking the argument further, I would propose that while the Judeo-Christian tension is ever present in Voltaire's anti-Jewish discourse, his attacks on the Jews are not subordinate to those against the Christians, but belong in a wider field which embraces all acts of intolerance. All groups or individuals, whether religious or secular, are held responsible for their own behaviour, and, where found wanting, they are condemned.¹¹⁷

As explained in the Introduction, my ensuing chapters will show, through a literary psychocritical reading largely based on the method developed by Maaron through the 1950s and '60s, that Voltaire's figures are consistent throughout his life's work. These chapters will also draw on the thinking of Pierre Bayard in his recent study on 'failed works', to propose that at a certain period in particular – the late 1740s to the mid 1750s – Voltaire's discourse indicates a certain loss of writerly control. This, adopting Bayard's terminology, suggests an 'écriture de l'hallucination', where the unconscious has come very close to the surface of the

¹¹⁶ D13369.

¹¹⁷ 'Voltaire et les Juifs', p.80.

text. Finally, as indicated above, I hope to show that despite this temporary loss of control, despite the current thinking and prejudices of his times, and despite his revulsion for what he deemed intolerable in the biblical Jews, in the main Voltaire stayed faithful to his fight for tolerance, for Jews no less than for others.

With these aims in mind, we shall first consider Voltaire's representation of Jewish and Christian identity, including the stereotypically perceived characteristics of both these groups; this enquiry must include a detailed consideration of relevant aspects of today's criticism of the writer. Our investigation will look at how he reveals his understanding of the contemporary fantasies, showing where at times this becomes particularly vehement. Voltaire realizes how an individual's thinking is influenced by his environment, his site of vision: 'On voit combien l'éducation, la patrie, tous les préjugés, gouvernent les hommes' (1756).¹¹⁸ But we must accept that we too are subject to our own particular prejudices, and we shall therefore bear in mind Voltaire's recommendation to us, his readers, as found in the *Essai sur les mœurs* where, referring to the disputes that occurred during the reign of Louis XII, he writes: 'La postérité éclairée sera étonnée qu'on ait fait de telles questions; mais il fallait alors respecter les préjugés du temps' (1756). We, as members of a later generation with additional hindsight, have to put aside our 'surprise' at certain comments and 'respect the prejudices of the times' in which he was writing.¹¹⁹ As Jean-Jacques Lecercle comments: 'Refuser le contexte historique en tant qu'il est incarné dans les intentions de sens de l'auteur, c'est entrer dans l'interprétation sans garde-fou.'¹²⁰

* * *

Confused perceptions of Jewish identity

Gilman has drawn attention to the eighteenth-century separation between the 'good' Jew and the 'bad', what Isaac Pinto in his *Réflexions critiques sur le 1^{er} chapitre du tome VII^e des Œuvres de M. de Voltaire* defined as 'the Jew of

¹¹⁸ *Essai sur les mœurs*, III, 106.

¹¹⁹ *Essai sur les mœurs*, II, 197.

¹²⁰ 'Shakespeare a-t-il vraiment voulu dire tout cela?', p.218.

Bordeaux' and 'the Jew of Metz'.¹²¹ Pinto accuses Voltaire of failing to observe these distinctions between the educated and the non-educated, the rich and the poor, but on occasion Voltaire marks them out clearly. In a few successful and enlightened individuals, usually named, he distinguishes an urbane quality – Orobio, 'un rabbin si savant' (1767), Spinoza, the 'modest' *métaphysicien* (1767), and the English financial traders who gather 'pour l'utilité des hommes' (1734).¹²² And later in his mockingly satirical text *Un Chrétien contre six Juifs*, answering the same charges, he separates the 'Portuguese' Jews ('of Bordeaux') from those of biblical times, alleging his 'esteem' for all of the former (1777).¹²³ But to the majority of Jews, the unnamed individuals whom he generally and collectively dismisses as poor and dirty, he attributes a lack of reasoning, apathy, resignation and non-resistance, traits similar to those that he finds in the French populace at large. This, as Gilman shows, was in line with the stereotypical thinking of the times: 'The good Jew was non disputatious [...] He was clean while the Other was dirty. He created; the Other seemed only to exist.' These stereotypes correspond with what we know about Voltaire's personal experiences and knowledge of the different groups; his social and financial relations (both bad and good) with those such as the Mendès da Costa family, and his probable ignorance of and lack of contact with the impoverished Jews of cities such as Metz and Strasbourg.¹²⁴

But Voltaire also shows to what degree the contemporary attitudes impinged on all Jewish people; while the poor were confined to the ghettos, excluded from most employment, and subjected to the prejudices of the times, even the rich and successful, those individuals partially embraced by the larger society, were not what one could call 'assimilated'. He satirically implies the discrimination in that above-mentioned passage that describes their active and useful role in the London Stock Exchange; on the trading floor 'le juif, le mahométan, et le chrétien traitent l'un avec

¹²¹ Reprinted in the Abbé Guénée's *Lettres de quelques Juifs*, p.12. Pinto's text first appeared in *Apologie par la nation juive*, (Amsterdam: 1762). Pinto also writes to Voltaire, c.10 July 1762 (D10579).

¹²² *Lettres à S.A. Mgr. Le Prince de *** sur Rabelais*, p.519, p.522; *Lettres philosophiques*, I, 74.

¹²³ *Un Chrétien contre six Juifs*, p.558.

¹²⁴ *Inscribing the Other*, p.125. Pomeau explains the details of Voltaire's dealings with his English bankers, the losses caused by the son, Anthony, and the probable partial financial assistance given by the father, John. *Voltaire en son temps*, I, 166-67. Jory points to the apparently limited contact Voltaire had with the Jews of Metz: 'no first hand knowledge [...] but [...] some acquaintance with their way of life at second hand'. 'Voltaire and the Jews of Metz', p.44.

l'autre comme s'ils étaient de la même religion, et ne donnent le nom d'infidèles qu'à ceux qui font banqueroute' (1734), but on leaving the workplace each goes off separately to his own environment, and there takes up again his different religious practices and social customs.¹²⁵ Here Sutcliffe, while conceding that – for Voltaire – the Jews as individuals were 'both entitled to toleration and deserving of sympathy for their sufferings', suggests that the author 'slips a hint of anti-Judaic sentiment into his vision of tolerant cosmopolitanism'. Sutcliffe proposes that Voltaire juxtaposes 'the straightforward pleasures of alcohol with the implied arcane futility of synagogue worship' so that the 'affirmation of the Jews' unproblematic and unqualified right to be tolerated is undermined from within'.¹²⁶ But I suggest that the mocking tone of this passage – the satirical reference to the allegedly bizarre practices regarding baptism, circumcision, and suitable church attire, the contradiction between the religious celebration of some and the social drinking of others – relates to that found throughout the *Lettres philosophiques*. Voltaire ridicules the customs of all strands of society, even those with whom he most sympathizes or identifies; the Quaker's unusual dress, temperance and religious practices, the Frenchman's automatic and exaggeratedly courtly manners, and, on a more critical note, even the judge's drunkenness, his daily excessive drinking 'de mauvaise bière et d'eau-de-vie' (1734).¹²⁷ Repeatedly in his texts Voltaire addresses the mixture of the good and the bad, the foolish and the commendable, the moderate and the extreme, found in all human activity. He writes of 'ces quakers pacifiques' whose religion 'a été tournée en ridicule', but of whom 'on a été forcé de respecter les mœurs' (1756);¹²⁸ he contrasts the Quakers' lack of falsity and unusually simple clothing with the behaviour of the artificial Frenchman who is 'all in miens [and] compliments', concerned solely with how he appears to others (1726-28?).¹²⁹ Even though appreciating the pleasures of 'civilized' society, 'la propreté, le goût, les ornements' (1736),¹³⁰ he criticizes the superficiality and the 'vanités [de] l'appareil' of those in elevated social positions (composed 1736?);¹³¹ he introduces the evident

¹²⁵ *Lettres philosophiques*, I, 74.

¹²⁶ 'Myth, Origins and Identity', p.118.

¹²⁷ *Lettres philosophiques*, I, 35.

¹²⁸ *Essai sur les mœurs*, II, 320.

¹²⁹ 'Small Leningrad Notebook', *Notebooks*, I, 54 (passage written in English).

¹³⁰ *Le Mondain*, p.295.

¹³¹ *Discours en vers sur l'homme*, p.458 (publication of first complete edition 1745).

contrast between his contemporary citizen's delight in *le bon vin* (1736),¹³² and the 'work' and 'sobriety' that was so beneficial to the people of seventeenth-century Holland (1756).¹³³

But at the same time Voltaire's representation of the Jews does portray them in the stereotypical terms of the time; they are 'a separate society' (1761) that exists as the other that defies definition and classification.¹³⁴ They, exiled from their 'original' home, denied citizenship in their new countries, were as Jacob Katz indicates, a body of strangers, 'barely sustaining itself on the margins of the state'.¹³⁵ Endeavouring to overcome the difficulty of a more precise specification and to fix their identity, Voltaire draws on the current fantasies and constructs a Jewish self synonymous with overpopulation, vagrancy, diaspora and alienation. Daniel Sibony demonstrates how an individual's *angoisse identitaire*, or 'phobie de l'autre' causes him to feel a need 'de fixer l'autre, de l'encadrer', and Mary Douglas reiterates this with her comment that 'most of us indeed would feel safer if our experience could be hard-set and fixed in form'. But Douglas exposes how, as in the case of Sartre's antisemite, it is impossible for the individual fully to satisfy this desire:

of course, the yearning for rigidity is in us all. It is part of our human condition to long for hard lines and clear concepts. When we have them we have to either face the fact that some realities elude them, or else blind ourselves to the inadequacy of the concepts.¹³⁶

Seeking such concepts, in *La Bible enfin expliquée* Voltaire represents the Jews as still 'today' numerous, 'wandering', 'dispersed' and 'despised' (1776).¹³⁷ In this late text that concerns itself chiefly with addressing the mythical, so-called 'absurdities' of the Bible, he gives weight to the arguments of Katz and Sutcliffe who both perceive a non-differentiation on the part of the writer between the biblical Jews and their descendents in the contemporary world. Katz contends that for Voltaire 'the people of Israel are conceived as one historical entity whose primary characteristics are permanent despite wandering and dispersions throughout the

¹³² *Le Mondain*, p.296.

¹³³ *Essai sur les mœurs*, III, 116.

¹³⁴ *Essai sur les mœurs*, II, 166.

¹³⁵ *From Prejudice to Destruction*, p.59.

¹³⁶ *Le 'racisme', une haine identitaire*, p.1; *Purity and Danger*, p.200.

¹³⁷ *La Bible enfin expliquée*, p.44, note 1.

ages'. He adds that the writer usually 'ignores historical distinctions and treats the Jews of every generation as a single entity', and then concludes that the 'distinction between past and present is entirely blurred'.¹³⁸ Using similar terms, Sutcliffe contends that Voltaire 'indiscriminately blurs together Jewish past and present'.¹³⁹ But I shall be exploring how the reference to the 'contemporary' Jews as perpetuating a biblical and social tradition usually takes one of two forms: either Voltaire dismantles the 'historical' element of Jewish tradition by emphasizing the fictionality of the so-called fables, or he portrays the connection between past and present in terms of the Jews' enduring persecution at the hands of others, their persisting confinement to unpopular trades, their constantly denigrated status, and their lasting errancy – in these latter cases he stresses their continued victimhood.

In the *Sermon du Rabbin Akib*, using the historical example of Christian suppression under the Muslims, the apparent non-integration of the former into the society of the latter, Voltaire goes so far as to query the importance given by the Church to Jewish diaspora, to question why it has interpreted Jewish misfortune as a 'crime' worthy of punishment. The rabbi asks in the name of the Jews: 'Quels avantages prétendez-vous donc tirer de ce que nous vivons parmi les nations sans nous incorporer à elles?' He then answers his own question, revealing the Christian fantasy that has given excuse to their discriminatory (if not persecutory) actions: 'Votre démente va jusqu'à dire que nous ne sommes dispersés que parce que nos pères condamnèrent au supplice celui que vous adorez' (1761).¹⁴⁰ The wandering existence of the Jews, a figure repeatedly represented as dating from earliest biblical times, is blamed on the therefore anachronistic evidence of Christ's subsequent crucifixion – a form of execution that Voltaire repeatedly portrays as performed solely by the Romans. But Katz proposes that the more positive tone of the *Sermon du Rabbin Akib* represents a 'lone case' where 'Voltaire absolves his contemporary Jews from the responsibility for sins attributed to their ancestors', and he perceives this action on the part of the writer as purely an answer to the demands of 'rationalistic ethics'.¹⁴¹ But, even while I find that such a rational action might show evidence of Voltaire's ethical desire to propagate tolerance towards those who held

¹³⁸ *From Prejudice to Destruction*, pp.41-42.

¹³⁹ 'Myth, Origins, Identity', p.109.

¹⁴⁰ *Sermon du Rabbin Akib*, p.282.

¹⁴¹ *From Prejudice to Destruction*, p.42.

beliefs with which he could not agree, I also propose that this particular work gives weight to our argument that we need to mark a separation between the writing of the years of crisis and those texts that may be defined as belonging to Voltaire's more rational or balanced periods.

* * *

Sermon des cinquante

Bayard contends that for a work to be successful, the author has to find a 'reasoned balance' between two types of writing: *l'écriture d'isolation* and *l'écriture d'hallucination*. The first is marked by a too rigid control, a lack of passion, that limits the artistic expression: 'le sujet a trop bien réussi la transformation littéraire du fantasme et, protégé par sa propre création, ne laisse plus aucun accès mener jusqu'à lui.' The second shows a failure on the part of the writer to 'filter' the desires of his unconscious: 'Les affects et les représentations liés à l'objet du fantasme ne sont pas suffisamment élaborés; ils envahissent le texte.' I propose that this latter form of writing, showing 'un excès de présence que les mots ne viennent pas tempérer', marks the vehemently critical *Sermon des cinquante*.¹⁴² In this text, Voltaire depicts the Jews as wretched brigands who belong to an 'atrocious nation', and he describes Joseph of the tribe of Judah, as 'un enfant de cette famille errante'. He throws further scorn on the Jews by connecting the figure of wandering to those of proliferation, foolishness and non-reason; he represents them 'multiplying' to two million people who 's'enfuient d'Égypte et [...] prennent le plus long [chemin] pour avoir le plaisir de passer la mer à sec'.¹⁴³ This reveals how Voltaire undermines the Jewish figure by his use of ridicule, that rhetorical device which he explains in his letter to d'Alembert. Condemning absurd religious tenets, he states that 'le ridicule est le point fixe avec lequel vous enlèverez tous ces marouffles, et les ferez disparaître' (1 May 1765).¹⁴⁴ Thus his mocking figures act as palimpsests which call for an effort on the part of the critic to look beneath the surface of the text. This device, by obliging the latter to question and to investigate the writer's meaning, not only emphasizes the

¹⁴² *Comment améliorer les œuvres ratées?*, pp.95-96.

¹⁴³ *Sermon des cinquante*, p.444, p.440, p.445. As all extracts from this text belong to the same period, dates will not be repeated. The same will apply to quotations from *Candide*.

¹⁴⁴ D12576.

underlining message when it is revealed, but persuades the reader to strip away the various interpretations that have been given to the issues addressed and to reconsider his own thinking regarding the same. His interest and involvement in these are increased because the author throughout his works – both comic and serious – renders his agenda more appealing or more palatable by the use of his wit. Voltaire makes full use of his art of satire and derision; he states (again to d'Alembert) that ridicule is 'la plus forte des armes' (26 June 1766), and in a similar vein, in *Le Siècle de Louis XIV*, contends that whatever has become ridiculous 'ne peut plus être dangereux' (1735-52).¹⁴⁵ Such thinking, separating the foolish from the genuine, the unimportant from the serious, repeats that of the *Lettres philosophiques*, where the Quaker indicates that the proof of the reasonableness of his faith – as set out in *Theologiae vere christianae apologia* (1675) – lies in the fact that their enemies 'acknowledge' that Robert Barclay's text 'is very dangerous' (1734).¹⁴⁶

In the *Sermon des cinquante* Voltaire uses similar mockery when describing the followers of Moses: 'Ces peuples errent dans le désert. [...] Ils n'ont ni pain ni pâtre; on leur fait pleuvoir des caillies et de la manne. Leurs habits se conservent quarante ans, et croissent avec les enfants nouveau-nés.' Here by his intended denigration and rejection of all possibility of fact, he removes from the Jews their very existence, virtually writing them out of history. He demolishes their claims to divine election, assertions based on the multiplying of their numbers, by satirically feigning to accept God's rewarding of them for their apparently horrific and immoral acts. Instead of receiving divine punishment for their 'despicable' actions, 'les filles de Loth sont récompensées par la plus grande et la plus chère des bénédictions selon l'esprit juif, elles sont mères d'une nombreuse postérité'. The Jews' own claims of identity, those based on their chosenness, are denied all possible veracity and logic by Voltaire's undermining of the justice of the God who has conferred this status. Status and identity based on injustice become untenable.¹⁴⁷

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¹⁴⁵ D13374; *Le Siècle de Louis XIV*, II, 62.

¹⁴⁶ *Lettres philosophiques*, I, 5; in the discussion the masculine pronoun is used for simplicity.

¹⁴⁷ *Sermon des cinquante*, p.446, p.440.

‘Juifs’

The figures of non-belonging and wandering again loom large in ‘Juifs’, where Voltaire writes: ‘les Hébreux ont presque toujours été ou errants, ou brigands, ou esclaves, ou séditieux; ils sont encore vagabonds aujourd’hui sur la terre’ (1756). He emphasizes the continued, enduring nature of these particular characteristics: ‘Les Guèbres, les Banians et les Juifs, sont les seuls peuples qui subsistent dispersés, et qui, n’ayant d’alliance avec aucune nation, se perpétuent au milieu des nations étrangères, et soient toujours à part du reste du monde’ (1756). Yet Voltaire distinguishes the Jews, ‘this singular nation’, from the other groups that he mentions. The Guèbres and the Banians are contained within certain regions, the Indies and the East, while the Jews are dispersed over ‘the face of all the earth’ (1756) – in this instance he portrays the Jews alone as having this particular characteristic of worldwide dispersal.¹⁴⁸ But we can compare this passage with that found in *Le Siècle de Louis XIV*, where he shows that the detrimental effect of the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes was that ‘les Français ont été dispersés plus loin que les Juifs’ (1735-52). This more contemporary reference to the negative results of religious discrimination, the loss to society incurred by persecutory actions, enables us to identify a figure applicable to his representation of the Jews; their alleged non-service to society was brought about by their ostracization by that very same society. Across his texts Voltaire repeatedly questions this aspect of the Jews, and sets their paradoxical roles of usefulness and non-usefulness in the context of the Christians’ manipulative and hypocritical treatment of them. He addresses the Jews’ position in the world in the light of the place allotted to them by others, deploying the figure of victimization to modify an identity constructed on outsider status, difference, and despised occupations.¹⁴⁹

In ‘Juifs’ Voltaire comments that in the light of the persecution that they have suffered throughout history, it is amazing that ‘non seulement ce peuple subsiste encore, mais qu’il ne soit pas moins nombreux aujourd’hui qu’il le fut autrefois’ (undated). This comment occurs among Voltaire’s apparently more controlled writing, but where the discourse is blatantly negative he mockingly reiterates the stereotypical fantasy of the Jews’ tendency to proliferate. He contends that their

¹⁴⁸ ‘Juifs’, p.518, p.512.

¹⁴⁹ *Le Siècle de Louis XIV*, II, 29.

concern (equally alleged to be that of the Arab peoples) has always been characterized by an 'interest in population' (1756). Then taking the popular stereotype even further, he connects it to a still more pejorative figure suggesting financial greed. For him the Jews have 'deux grands devoirs: des enfants et de l'argent' (1756). Voltaire dates this perceived tendency to population growth from their early history, satirically commenting that in ancient Egypt 'il n'y a point d'exemple sur la terre d'une population si prodigieuse' (1756). And, moving the figure into the present, he contends that if the Jews were now to reunite, they would become 'une nation beaucoup plus nombreuse qu'elle ne le fut jamais dans le court espace où ils furent souverains de la Palestine' (1756).¹⁵⁰ These representations of the Jews' population growth demonstrate the flexible nature of Voltaire's discourse. He denigrates the Jews in two contradictory ways; on one hand representing them in terms of the impossible foolishness of their textual claims – the excessive multiplication of their numbers in times past – and on the other in the stereotypical, if not racist, terms of an ever increasing demographic foreign force. But the manipulative nature of Voltaire's text of 1756, his mocking presentation of the true picture, *as he sees it*, regarding the number of Jewish people currently alive, is revealed by his later comments. In *Un Chrétien contre six Juifs* he gives a sardonically precise enumeration of the Jews reportedly living at the time in Europe and the East; he declares: 'Voilà tout ce que je connais de votre population; elle ne se monte qu'à cent huit mille sept cent trente Juifs' (1777).¹⁵¹ Later, in a similar vein, giving a larger, possibly more global figure, he states in relation to the contemporary Jewish population: 'Il n'est point étrangement abondant; on a calculé qu'il n'existe pas aujourd'hui six cent mille individus juifs' (1777). While these comments might indeed be the result of later information that he received, I find here further evidence of Voltaire's satirical, but also more balanced, writing. In the *Dernières remarques sur les pensées de Pascal*, very possibly his final text, the discourse appears marked by a more documentary intention, even if one with the negatively passive implication that the Jews are a minority of little influence, no power, merely subject to the will of others.¹⁵²

¹⁵⁰ 'Juifs', p.524, p.513, p.518, p.513, p.512.

¹⁵¹ *Un Chrétien contre six Juifs*, p.557.

¹⁵² *Dernières remarques*, p.36.

Voltaire constantly indicates that despite the European desire (and his own) to define a Jewish essence, the difficulty of identification ever remains. This insoluble 'problem' has confronted Christians of all times, leading to their imposition on the Jews of, what the writer calls, 'infamous markers', a forced wearing of distinguishing symbols (undated).¹⁵³ In this case Voltaire's choice of adjective gives us a sympathetic figure despite the tension the passage introduces. Appearing among the private papers, this comment suggests a more tolerant personal attitude on his part than that possibly suggested by Desné in such circumstances. Desné, in his criticism of Poliakov, considers that the latter's charge of antisemitism against Voltaire depends too much on the private jottings, often satirical and tendentious, that were posthumously included in 'Juifs'. He thereby identifies a difference of tone between the public and the private discourse. But while he discovers in the latter a tendency towards a more critical representation of the Jews, I find in this particular passage of 'Juifs' evidence of a certain sympathy on the part of Voltaire towards them, even though this statement as it stands was not apparently intended for public airing. Rather than a difference of tone between the public and private discourses regarding the Jews, I see a correspondence between the two. Just as the negative Jewish figures of the private papers recur in the texts for publication, the sympathetic ones also appear in both.¹⁵⁴

Jennifer Tsien notes a similar separation between the various texts, but one that she relates to a matter of taste, of what Voltaire might consider acceptable for his fellow-enlightened, but detrimental to the good of his wider readership. She finds an elitist explanation for this discrepancy in his discourse, one that explains the apparent gap between his openly declared social values and his privately diffused (if at times questionable) aesthetic expression. Tsien states that Voltaire's 'professions of decency only applied to the works he produced for the public, while those literary inside jokes that he produced and circulated in his circle of friends escaped the rules he imposed on the rest of literature'.¹⁵⁵

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¹⁵³ 'Juifs', p.525.

¹⁵⁴ 'Voltaire était-il antisémite?', p.121.

¹⁵⁵ 'Voltaire and the Temple of bad taste', p.369.

Essai sur les mœurs and La Philosophie de l'histoire

In the *Essai sur les mœurs* Voltaire again points to the difficulty of identification, taking up once more the theme of markers. In a passage that re-emphasizes the negative nature of the discrimination that the Jews have suffered, he writes: 'Le concile de Latran ordonna qu'ils portassent une petite roue sur la poitrine, pour les distinguer des chrétiens. Ces marques changèrent avec le temps; mais partout on leur faisait porter une à laquelle on pût les reconnaître' (1761).¹⁵⁶ Voltaire connects the imposing of markers to the persecution suffered by the wearers, and observes lucidly that violence when it happens, is not an effect of this or that specific difference or distinguishing sign, but triggered by manipulation on the part of the authorities for political purposes. He points to the hypocritical paradox, the need, when finding an absence of visible difference, for authorities to create one, to introduce an identifying mark of otherness. Voltaire's analysis significantly prefigures, and is corroborated by present-day theorists of identity. About such artificially created 'physical differentiation', Langmuir comments:

whether individual members are distinguishable by cultural or by physiological differences, recognition of their empirical reality will be repressed by the symbolic significance of their label; that is, the sight of identifiable Jews will only bring the significance ascribed to 'the Jews' to mind.

Langmuir sees the function of the Jews to symbolize 'social and psychic menaces' experienced by the 'ingroup' as one that 'makes them peculiarly valuable' to the society subject to such chimeria. He indicates how 'real Jews have been irrationally converted in the minds of many into a symbol, "the Jews," a symbol whose meaning does not depend on the empirical characteristics of Jews yet justifies their total elimination from the earth'.¹⁵⁷ Jean-François Lyotard reinforces this view by his reference to 'the jews' (and their extermination): 'Car ce n'est pas comme hommes, femmes et enfants qu'on les extermine, mais comme le nom de ce qui est maudit,

¹⁵⁶ *Essai sur les mœurs*, II, 162-63.

¹⁵⁷ *Toward a Definition of Antisemitism*, p.340, p.349, p.352.

‘juifs’, que l’Occident a donné à l’angoisse inconsciente.’¹⁵⁸ As expressed by David Carroll: ‘the jews’ find themselves ‘in the (non)place of an Otherness that thought cannot think but cannot not think either.’¹⁵⁹ Otto Fenichel explains how traditionally the role of the scapegoat has been projected on to the Jews, and Slavoj Zizek shows how the Jews correspond to a fantasy figure for the societies in which they find themselves. They serve others as an ‘explanation’ for the lack of harmony in society, an ‘explanation’ that in fact covers up the reality of society’s impossibility. He writes:

What appears as the hindrance to society’s full identity with itself is actually its positive condition: by transposing onto the Jew the role of the foreign body which introduces in the social organism disintegration and antagonism, the fantasy-image of society *qua* consistent, harmonious whole is rendered possible.¹⁶⁰

Regardless, therefore, of the physical form it takes, the mark of identity imposed on Jews by the members of the Church since the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) is the symbol of a symbol, an empty signifier which, according to Laclau, announces itself ‘as the impossibility of realizing what is within [the] limits’ of signification; it is a signifier that is constitutively inadequate because it has been ‘emptied in order to assume the representing function’.¹⁶¹

Dennis Prager and Joseph Telushkin state that the ‘first aim of Jewish law is to have the Jew express his affirmation of God and denial of other gods in daily actions’, and, accordingly, enforcing Jewish difference by insistence on particular religious and social practices, the Torah visibly sets the Jews apart from other people.¹⁶² This moves the argument into the area of self-marking, and Karen Armstrong echoes this thinking when she refers to a further contradictory element found in the adoption of distinguishing signs. She shows how in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Spain the very name given to the new Jewish Christians, *Marranos* (from the Spanish word for ‘pigs’), even though intended as a term of abuse, was

¹⁵⁸ *Heidegger et ‘les juifs’*, p.53.

¹⁵⁹ Introduction to *Heidegger and “the jews”*, p.xii.

¹⁶⁰ *Enjoy Your Symptom!*, p.90.

¹⁶¹ *Emancipation(s)*, p.37, p.40.

¹⁶² *Why the Jews?*, p.17.

adopted as a 'badge of pride' by some of the converts.¹⁶³ Similarly Mary Douglas, investigating in the 1970s the situation of 'the Bog Irish' and their continued adherence to the laws of Friday abstinence, explains the significance of chosen or rejected symbols. While the Catholic Church had removed from its followers the obligation to eat fish on Friday, among the poor Irish immigrants of London of the time the practice remained. Here, according to Douglas, 'the sense of exile and boundary is sharper' and Friday abstinence being 'no empty symbol, it means allegiance to a humble home [...] and to a glorious tradition'. Thus for the marginalized a symbol can move from one meaning to another; it may become subverted into an expression of their sense of apartness'.¹⁶⁴

Voltaire suggests that same ambiguity in the Quaker's display of difference by his rejection of the 'markers of dignity' worn by others. The latter declares: 'Nous portons aussi un habit un peu différent des autres hommes, afin que ce soit pour nous un avertissement continuel de ne leur pas ressembler' (1734).¹⁶⁵ Voltaire's treatment of the Quakers arrives as close as is possible to a commendation. Their choice of dress, manners, etc., are as near as man has yet come to the pure, unadulterated, impoverished lifestyle of Jesus, and he suggests that to achieve that pure state, to emulate the way of Christ, contemporary people do not have to adopt the exclusiveness marked by ritual or violence. The Quakers' exclusivity is one of free choice, open to all who opt for a righteous peaceful life, and their rejection is only of those signifiers of humanity's acquisitive greed and selfishness. But this also introduces the inherent problem contained in such gestures; the particular group's desire to separate itself from its other by the adoption of a visible sign indicates a rejection of what it finds undesirable. Non-significant gestures of cultural difference are scorned by Voltaire where a perceived superiority of self accompanies the adoption. In *Un Chrétien contre six Juifs* he refers to circumcision in ancient Egypt as 'un privilège qui n'était alors réservé qu'aux prêtres d'Isis et aux initiés' (1777).¹⁶⁶ The figure is repeated in *La Bible enfin expliquée* where he describes this marker of the Egyptian priesthood 'comme un signe d'association qui les distinguait

¹⁶³ *The Battle for God*, p.7.

¹⁶⁴ *Natural Symbols*, p.40.

¹⁶⁵ *Lettres philosophiques*, I, 6.

¹⁶⁶ *Un Chrétien contre six Juifs*, p.558.

du genre humain' (1776).¹⁶⁷ Similarly in the *Traité sur la tolérance* he questions the activities, the dress and the customs of certain Christian religious confraternities who, he alleges, had sworn to 'hate their brothers'. Thus he writes: 'Pourquoi se distinguer ainsi des autres citoyens? S'en croyait-on plus parfait? Cela même est une insulte au reste de la nation' (1763).¹⁶⁸ It is here that Voltaire's criticism of the Christians converges with that of the Jews; both are censured for their actions of self-marking or self-distinction. The former have carried out their brutal ceremonies bedecked in the trappings of their self-claimed authority, the latter have distinguished themselves as the chosen people by the (for Voltaire) barbaric and ridiculous ritual of circumcision. He excoriates the actions of the Christians who have falsely invested with hypocritical ceremonial their savage acts of butchery, as embodied *par excellence* in the *auto-da-fé*; he reviles the Jews, who he contends – like others before them – have taken their activities to a more mundane level, one that defies civilized human reason. He writes:

Le baptême est commun à toutes les anciennes nations de l'Orient; la circoncision des Égyptiens, des Arabes et des Juifs, est infiniment postérieure: car rien n'est plus naturel que de se laver; et il a fallu bien des siècles avant d'imaginer qu'une opération contre la nature et contre la pudeur pût plaire à l'Être des êtres. (1769)¹⁶⁹

While he mocks all religious ceremonies that have been created by man, Voltaire distinguishes between what he conceives as natural and what he views as contrary to nature and pudicity.

In the *Essai sur les mœurs* Voltaire again suggests that Jewishness might be found in the Jews' wandering nature, a characteristic shared with the Gypsies – another 'vagabond little nation' (1761) – although he then reduces the significance of this relationship by marking a separation between those same Gypsies and the Jews.¹⁷⁰ Sibony, analyzing typical racist attitudes, marks out a stereotypical linkage between these two groups. He writes:

¹⁶⁷ *La Bible enfin expliquée*, p.25, note 1.

¹⁶⁸ *Traité sur la tolérance*, p.140.

¹⁶⁹ *Essai sur les mœurs*, I, 201.

¹⁷⁰ *Essai sur les mœurs*, II, 165.

C'est donc comme symbole que le "Juif" fut obsédant; symbole de l'identité qui échappe, de la différence qui vire au même, de l'origine en manque, de la mémoire menaçante... Le peuple tzigane, lui, fut chargé de symboliser l'"asocial", le trait asocial que comporte toute société et sans lequel elle devient folle.¹⁷¹

But in this case Voltaire, repeating his much reiterated deprecation of the Gypsies' forefathers, dismisses 'ces restes d'Egyptiens adorateurs secrets d'Isis', and creates instead a connection between the Jews and the more favourably represented Guèbres and Banians (1765) – a change of emphasis that may indicate, to use Bayard's term, the 'filtering' of the unconscious by the writer, his desire in this period for a more balanced representation.¹⁷² He then goes further, alleging that in the past the Jewish desire to remain apart from other peoples was an essential characteristic of their identity, one that differentiated them from the Muslims.

Les Hébreux [...] associèrent rarement les étrangers à leur culte. Les musulmans arabes incorporèrent à eux les autres nations; les Hébreux s'en tinrent toujours séparés. [...] Le peuple hébreu avait en horreur les autres nations, et craignait toujours d'être asservi; le peuple arabe, au contraire, voulut attirer tout à lui, et se crut fait pour dominer. (1756)

Here he invests the representation of the Hebrews with characteristics of subservience and fearfulness, attributes of non-resistance that he constantly associates with his Jewish figures. But, in a similarly dated passage, Voltaire reverses this figure of hatred and rejection, taking it from one manifested by the Jews to that where the 'horror' is demonstrated against them by others. He makes the negative comment that the Jews are 'en horreur à tous les peuples chez lesquels ils sont admis' (1756).¹⁷³

He contends that since Mohammed, they have in fact ceased 'to compose a body of people' and, as in 'Juifs', he reasserts his surprise at Jewish survival, declaring that, given their having never had a country of their own, 'il est étonnant qu'il reste encore des Juifs' – a situation he explains with the satirical comment that

¹⁷¹ *Le 'racisme', une haine identitaire*, p.201.

¹⁷² *La Philosophie de l'histoire*, p.236.

¹⁷³ *Essai sur les mœurs*, I, 208, II, 160.

‘Dieu [...] rendit cette nation si différente en tout des autres hommes’ (1765). However, this suggestion of chosenness he then immediately dismantles, exploiting mathematical logic in an attempt to prove the impossibility of Jewish assertions, their claimed growth in number in biblical times. He satirically enumerates the alleged losses recorded in the Bible, figures which, by his mockingly precise reckoning, add up to a ‘total sum’ of 239,020 victims, ‘exterminés par l’ordre de Dieu même, ou par leurs guerres civiles, sans compter ceux qui périrent dans le désert, et ceux qui moururent dans les batailles contre les Cananéens etc’. He sardonically summarizes: ‘on ne pourrait concevoir comment les enfants de Jacob auraient pu produire une race assez nombreuse pour supporter une telle perte’ (1765).¹⁷⁴

Many of Voltaire’s texts apply this figure of the Jews as a group given to self-proliferation in order to undermine the authenticity of the biblical texts. So, drawing attention to the way texts confuse fact and fable, he emphasizes the fictional nature of the numbers accredited to the biblical Jews by the Jesuit, Denis Petau: ‘Et ce n’est pourtant pas à la suite des *Mille et une Nuits* qu’il a fait imprimer ce beau dénombrement’ (1770-72).¹⁷⁵ In the ‘Avant-propos’ of the *Essai sur les mœurs*, Voltaire distinguishes between the fact of science and the merely probable of non-science: ‘N’admettons en physique que ce qui est prouvé, et en histoire que ce qui est de la plus grande probabilité reconnue’ (1761).¹⁷⁶ The same figure occurs in ‘Tolérance’, where he insists on the separation of the factual or believable and the fictional or incredible.

toute secte, comme on sait, est un titre d’erreur; il n’y a point de secte de géomètres,
d’algébristes, d’arithméticiens, parce que toutes les propositions de géométrie, d’algèbre,
d’arithmétique sont vraies. Dans toutes les autres sciences on peut se tromper. (1764)¹⁷⁷

Remaining constant in his indictment of the allegedly fabulous and unbelievable nature of the Old Testament accounts, at the end of his life Voltaire reiterates his view that the Bible was ‘not given to us to instruct us in geometry and physics’

¹⁷⁴ *La Philosophie de l’histoire*, p.234, p.230.

¹⁷⁵ ‘Population’, M.xx, p.247 (originally in the *Questions sur l’Encyclopédie*).

¹⁷⁶ *Essai sur les mœurs*, I, 164 (dated 1740 by Moland).

¹⁷⁷ ‘Tolérance’, VF, p.563.

(1776).¹⁷⁸

With Voltaire, as with most of his contemporaries in France, the size of the country's population was ever of concern, one that present-day research suggests was unfounded. But the fear of demographic decline caused by war, colonization and disease becomes integrated with the criticisms of many *philosophes* regarding the restrictive moral practices of the Church, above all its teaching on chastity in the monastic sphere. As Mark Hulliung writes: 'Arguments against celibacy and seclusion are so much the common currency of the French Enlightenment that one blow delivered against the monastic life blends into another.'¹⁷⁹ And with Voltaire the philosophical and pragmatic questions become linked. Thus he moves the argument from one that addresses the 'sacred right' of people to populate the world, to another that emphasizes the practical distinctions between Protestant and Catholic countries. He writes: 'Je crois l'Angleterre, l'Allemagne protestante, la Hollande, plus peuplées à proportion. La raison en est évidente: il n'y a point dans ces pays-là de moines qui jurent à Dieu d'être inutiles aux hommes' (1770-72).¹⁸⁰ Voltaire's condemnation of the religious authorities for their enforced incarceration of young people in, what he sees as, unnatural environments, becomes represented in the figures of Frère Giroflée in *Candide*, and the nuns in *La Pucelle*. He decries the 'uselessness' of the lives of those in enclosed orders, rails against the uncalled-for suffering caused by the denial of natural human affections and inclinations, and condemns the non-procreation that results from such actions. In the *Essai sur les mœurs*, even while distinguishing between religious houses that serve some practical purpose and those that do not, he concludes that the great number of such establishments have 'dérobé trop de sujets à la société civile'. And, drawing a contrast between Jewish and Catholic teachings, Voltaire points to the practical and humanely productive nature of the practices of certain Jewish groups, whereby they 'n'eurent ni esséniennes ni filles thérapeutes' (1756).¹⁸¹ However, while this might suggest a reversal of the negative 'Jewish figure' of proliferation by showing the desire for children not to be one of ambitious 'racial' growth, but one of sensible pragmatism and social usefulness, we still have to be aware of the Christian

¹⁷⁸ *La Bible enfin expliquée*, p.18, note 2.

¹⁷⁹ *The Autocritique of Enlightenment*, p.15.

¹⁸⁰ 'Population', p.252 (originally in the *Questions sur l'Encyclopédie*).

¹⁸¹ *Essai sur les mœurs*, II, 344.

fantasies explored by Gilman. When attributing the increase in number of contemporary Jews 'à leur ardeur pour le mariage, à leur coutume de le contracter de bonne heure dans leurs familles, à leur loi de divorce' (undated), Voltaire taps into the stereotypical thinking regarding Jewish endogamous marriage.¹⁸²

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Candide

In *Candide* Voltaire again places a stress on the theme of wandering, this time in connection with the non-Jewish eponymous hero. But certain figures found in the portrayal of the naïve Candide link up with those used in Voltaire's representation of the Jews. Revealed solely through his actions or through his experiences which are the result of natural causes or man's treatment of him, the protagonist is given minimal personal identity; he is the outsider, with no family, no home, no formal name or identification. Adding to his representation, Voltaire portrays Candide as a bastard. He uses the popular eighteenth-century figure that exposes 'many of the ambiguities in the relations of society': the illegitimate outsider, by not fully belonging to any group, questions the role of the individual in the social space.¹⁸³ Wherever the wandering Candide goes, he is ever a stranger; he soon feels compelled to move on, constantly searching for happiness in a better world. Finally, having grown more realistic and pragmatic, he, the outsider from Christian Europe, settles as the religious other in the Islamic nation, Turkey, a portrayal that fictionally dismantles Voltaire's assertions of the Jews' singularity in the aforementioned texts, and one which points towards his late comment that 'tout homme est libre de se choisir une patrie' (1771).¹⁸⁴

But Voltaire also introduces certain Jews into this *conte*: the nameless individuals, whose sole identity is found in that of their victimhood at the hands of the Inquisition, or in their trades as money-lenders, and the rich merchant 'lover' of Cunégonde, Don Issachar, whose name, as Pomeau proposes, recalls the Old Testament and his position as a 'Portugese Jew'. Drawing our attention to a possible

¹⁸² 'Juifs', p.524.

¹⁸³ John Leigh, *The Search for Enlightenment*, p.23.

¹⁸⁴ 'Philosophe', M.xx, p.203 (originally in the *Questions sur l'Encyclopédie*).

tension, Pomeau suggests that Voltaire's decision to change the name from Ourdos – as found deleted in the manuscript – shows a desire to remove the exotic with its 'nuance de bassesse brutale', and to present 'the Jew' in a guise more in keeping with his position as Cunégonde's 'protectress'. But, further to this, I propose that in light of Voltaire's sometimes sympathetic representation of Don Issachar, and the negative portrayal of his treatment at the hands of the Christians, the textual alteration marks his intention to stress the illogical and unjust nature of all discrimination; to give greater resonance to this, he needs to minimize difference.¹⁸⁵

Don Issachar, the prosperous merchant, an eighteenth-century 'good' Jew, stands out as a relatively positive figure. But even though Voltaire gives him a name and a personalized identification, he is not recognizable for anything except his representation of 'Jewishness'. Through this character the writer demonstrates the level of society's non-assimilation of Jews, even of those who are educated; the Inquisitor attempts to strengthen his claim to Cunégonde by reminding her of 'the Jew's' inappropriateness as a lover, and, after death, denied the rights of proper burial, Don Issachar's body is thrown in the public pit.¹⁸⁶ We find in this repetition of what is – in Voltaire's work – a much used figure that is representative of all social intolerance and religious dogmatism, an indication of a certain sympathy for the Jews. Voltaire's concern regarding the discrimination shown even after death to particular individuals and groups, the inhumane disposal of their bodies, is one that he extends to all such victims – alleged non-believers or nonconformists, Jews, Protestants, Jansenists and deists, prostitutes (such as Paquette) and actresses (such as Mlle Monine, the fictional embodiment of Voltaire's friend and probable lover, Adrienne Lecouvreur, who suffered this fate in 1730). Voltaire underlines the unjustness of her treatment in his letter to Algarotti, writing: 'il est plaisant qu'on enterre le bourreau avec cérémonie, et qu'on ait jettée à la voirie M^{lle} Lecouvreur' (1 May 1761).¹⁸⁷

Lenard R. Berlanstein draws attention to the denial of civil status to Jews, Protestants and actors in France before 1789,¹⁸⁸ and Ruth Richardson has explored in the nineteenth-century English context the understanding of disrespect for the

¹⁸⁵ *Candide* (1959), p.49.

¹⁸⁶ *Candide*, p.145.

¹⁸⁷ D9761.

¹⁸⁸ 'Women and Power in Eighteenth-Century France', p.186.

bodies of the dead. She writes: 'The significance of the human corpse in popular death culture [...] seems to have been coloured by a prevailing belief in the existence of a strong tie between body and personality/soul for an undefined period of time after death.' She finds that 'meanings and values attached to the customary treatment of the dead meant that in the early nineteenth century' people did not just fear 'the exposure of nakedness' or 'the possibility of assault upon and disrespect towards the dead', but also 'the deliberate mutilation or destruction of identity, perhaps for eternity'. In the eighteenth century Voltaire already shows the way for the respect that Richardson insists is necessary.¹⁸⁹

Voltaire emphasizes how in France, following the revocation of the Edict of Nantes, Protestants who refused the sacraments, after death had their bodies 'traînés sur la claie, et jetés à la voirie' (1735-52), and in *Candide* he draws attention to the persecutory measures resulting from the *Bulle Unigenitus* (1713), that papal edict which imposed impossible demands on devout Jansenists or non-conformists.¹⁹⁰ Unable to renounce their articles of faith, to profess penitence for their alleged heresy, these were refused the *billets de confessions* that certified their final absolution, and, without such proof, they were denied proper burial and the promise of eternal rest. This is one area of commiseration for the collective of victims, in which Voltaire, the follower of deist thinking, clearly identifies himself; sympathy becomes empathy.

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La Pucelle

In *La Pucelle* the characters are similar to those of *Candide*, many identified solely by their figurative names or by their constant movement. Above all Agnès, the King's *errante* mistress (1730-62), his 'charmant péché' (1730-62) who has 'perdu la trace' (1730-62), most resembles the ingenuous *Candide*. Voltaire purposely combines characters who are both historical (Jeanne d'Arc, Charles VII, Agnès Sorel, Dunois the 'charmant bâtard', etc.) and fictional (Sacrogorion,

¹⁸⁹ *Death, Dissection and the Destitute*, p.7, p.29.

¹⁹⁰ *Le Siècle de Louis XI*, II, 30.

Hermaphrodix, and *la vieille*, etc.), thus creating a dual representation. As with the incorporation of real events and places in *Candide*, here the introduction of a factual element gives authority to the text, places it within the field of lived human experience, while that which is fantastical and farcical allows the author to relate episodes that otherwise would be totally unpalatable. The contradiction between the true and the false contrives both to engage and to amuse the reader, to allow him to sympathize without an excessive sense of personal involvement or responsibility for the actions of his fellow men, an awareness that might bring about a rejection of the text. Again, by Voltaire's wit, the reader is encouraged to read on.¹⁹¹

As for the Jews who appear in the poem, these are restricted to those ancient figures of the biblical scriptures, 'ce peuple errant pendant quarante années' (1755-62), or to the marginal, prophesizing advisors of Charles VII, with the one exception of the old woman's unnamed acquaintance, 'Un circoncis', 'Le digne Hébreu', the 'Enfant barbu d'Isaac et de Juda' (1755-62). Described in intentionally stereotypical terms that emphasize his Jewish otherness, this figure, like the Jews found in *Candide*, belongs in the contemporary field, and as such is separated off from the (for Voltaire) fictional figures of the biblical past. He, the money-lending Jew of the 'modern' world presents a double image; the devious, scheming trader who, as Voltaire repeatedly indicates across his texts, is himself manipulated, confined within the social space allotted to him, restricted to the despised role accorded to him by Christian society.¹⁹²

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Voltaire's invective and the reproaches of Isaac Pinto and others

Here temporarily setting aside our analysis of the chosen texts, we must consider the question of a writer's responsibility, and how we should view the relevance of private discourse in our judgement of his works. While Desné calls for a separation in the writings on the Jews between those intended for private distribution or those destined for the public, Cotoni points out that Voltaire's texts

¹⁹¹ *La Pucelle*, X, 391, p.430; II, 478, p.297; X, 368, p.429.

¹⁹² *La Pucelle*, XVI, 126, p.509; VIII, 417, 421, 418, p.404.

inspired Henri Labroue to publish his *Voltaire antijuif* (1942) as a 'warning' to the Vichy government.¹⁹³ Poliakov adheres to this view, but as Pascal Pellerin points out much of Poliakov's argument rests on a misrepresentation: he does not perceive the nature of Labroue's contrived interpretation of the texts, the way he selects and discards passages so that he can present 'l'image d'un philosophe champion de la tolérance et de la raison *donc antisémite*' (my italics).¹⁹⁴ Mervaud also demolishes Labroue's work as an 'anthologie composée de textes extraits de leur contexte, artificiellement découpés, largement annotés par des citations de Céline ou des frères Tharaud'. For her, Voltaire was misrepresented in the 1940s by a manipulative choice of references taken from his works so as to construct an argument 'suivant une problématique raciste', an opinion again shared by Desné who considers that it was this that brought about the subsequent (mistaken) 'image' of the *philosophe* as an antisemite.¹⁹⁵ To illustrate his point further, Desné comments that Drumont, considering that Voltaire's 'hostility' towards the Jews was based on personal resentments, regretted that 'unfortunately' it had no connection with the 'antisemite cause'.¹⁹⁶ Even as we try to understand the reason for Voltaire's statements, and, while we acknowledge Langmuir's contention that 'xenophobes can listen to the assertions invented by people prone to chimeria and reinterpret them to serve their own needs', another point deserves mention: critics who wish to charge Voltaire with irresponsibility, lack of concern for the possible effects produced by his remarks, should base their accusations on those texts that he intended for public view – although sometimes the separation between the public and the private might be difficult to define. This does not mean, however, that we may disregard the private discourses. These ought to be given a place in any analysis of Voltaire's conscious thinking and any possible consideration of its unconscious determinants.¹⁹⁷

But, in order to consider the impact of his work on the public of his day, we need temporarily to defer moral judgement. Haskell M. Block in his investigation of certain German thinkers of the period, including Goethe, discovers evidence of

¹⁹³ 'Voltaire lit la bible', p.186.

¹⁹⁴ 'Le "Voltaire antijuif" d'Henri Labroue', p.176.

¹⁹⁵ *Le 'Dictionnaire philosophique' de Voltaire*, p.86.

¹⁹⁶ *Inventaire Voltaire*, p.80-81.

¹⁹⁷ *Toward a Definition of Antisemitism*, p.350.

Voltaire's beneficial influence on contemporary attitudes. He writes that the appeal to tolerance in Lessing is closely akin to Voltaire's appeal in his *Traité sur la tolérance*, and sets forth a similar call to positive action'. Block also describes how 'in the *Briefe zu Beförderung der Humanität* of 1795 Herder gives special thanks to those who pleaded for tolerance and exposed persecution in its true light. His list begins with Locke, Bayle and Spinoza, and ends with Voltaire'.¹⁹⁸

Regarding the Jewish discourse in particular, Mervaud has considered the reactions 'que les plaisanteries et injures de Voltaire ont suscitées de son temps', and she quotes the remark of Zalind Hourwitz who commented that 'il se peut bien que Voltaire en ait moins voulu aux juifs modernes qu'aux anciens, c'est-à-dire au tronc du christianisme contre lequel il vise sans cesse'. Demonstrating how, for his contemporaries, Voltaire's attacks appear solely as part of a critical biblical exegesis, Mervaud contends that he 'ne s'intéresse guère au statut actuel des juifs, il ne veut pas s'y intéresser'. For her, his dismissive attitude towards the Jewish people gives evidence of his lack of interest in the 'distinctions élitistes entre séfarades et ashkénazes'.¹⁹⁹

Elie Bertrand found continued evidence of Voltaire's stereotypical thinking while the latter was writing the *Essai sur les mœurs*; the Swiss pastor contended that, despite wishing to write a 'history' of the world, Voltaire, an 'ennemi des Juifs' was going to discredit them considerably in the text under production.²⁰⁰

However, Schwarzbach contends that Jewish *apologistes* of the Enlightenment, Hourwitz and Isaïe Berr-Bing, 'voyaient un côté positif même dans l'œuvre de Voltaire, tout virulent qu'il fût parfois contre les Juifs'.²⁰¹ Desné too, going further than Mervaud when quoting Hourwitz, shows how the latter pointed to the 'good' that the *philosophe* had indirectly brought to the Jewish people. Regarding the Jews, Hourwitz contended:

quoique sans le vouloir, peut-être sans le savoir, car s'ils jouissent depuis quelques années

d'un peu de repos, ils en sont redevables au progrès des Lumières, auquel Voltaire a sûrement

¹⁹⁸ 'Confrontations of Voltaire in 18th-century Germany', p.1167, p.1169.

¹⁹⁹ *Le 'Dictionnaire philosophique' de Voltaire*, p.87, p.88. Mervaud takes her quotation of Hourwitz from Poliakov, *Histoire de l'antisémitisme*, p.117.

²⁰⁰ D12066 (30 August 1764) to baron Johann Hartwig Ernst von Bernstorff.

²⁰¹ 'Une nation reniée – une nation adoptée', p.331.

plus contribué qu'aucun autre écrivain, par ses nombreux ouvrages contre le fanatisme.²⁰²

The Abbé Guénée, following Pinto's publication of *Réflexions critiques*, took up the argument in favour of the Jewish people. By adopting the persona of the Jews, an action that caused Voltaire to dub him 'secrétaire juif', Guénée was playing Voltaire at his own game: 'Assez souvent Voltaire s'était déguisé en pasteur protestant, en "papa" grec, en évêque orthodoxe, ou en rabbin juif. L'abbé Guénée eut l'ingéniosité de retourner contre Voltaire les procédés voltairiens.'²⁰³ The Abbé, as a man of letters and a member of the Church, questions the separation, as he sees it, between the propaganda of universal tolerance as set out in the *Traité sur la tolérance* and the *philosophe's* negative representation of the Jews. Using their voice, Guénée asks how Voltaire could have treated 'notre nation, nos livres sacrés, et tout ce qui nous est cher, d'une manière si opposée au caractère d'équité et de modération'. He adds: 'Aurions-nous cru devoir trouver tant de prévention et tant de haine contre un peuple malheureux, dans l'ouvrage d'un Philosophe conciliateur et ami du genre humain!' The Abbé condemns the prejudiced and stereotypical nature of Voltaire's attacks and he asks: 'A-t-on jamais jugé d'une nation par les dérèglements de quelques particuliers?'²⁰⁴ Albertan-Coppola shows how, in his critique of the *Traité sur la tolérance*, Guénée exposes the manipulative way 'Voltaire infléchit la logique et l'Histoire pour faire entrer le peuple juif comme modèle dans son grand dessein antifanatique, sans pour autant renoncer à enfourcher son cheval de bataille antijudaïque à finalité antichrétienne'.²⁰⁵ Guénée refutes Voltaire's representation of the Jews as tolerant on the grounds that it is a false proposition created solely in order to further the writer's programme of universal tolerance. And, pointing to the manipulative nature of Voltaire's interpretation of the Jewish biblical texts on which Christianity is based, he underlines the danger of such slanderous discourse as found in 'Des Juifs'. He declares: 'Le poids que cet illustre écrivain donne par son autorité à ses préjugés était capable d'écraser cette nation.'²⁰⁶ This dispute between Guénée and Voltaire lasted some fourteen years, a

²⁰² *Inventaire Voltaire*, p.81 (Hourwitz quoted from Desné).

²⁰³ Sylvain Menant and René Pomeau, *Voltaire en son temps*, II, 503.

²⁰⁴ *Lettres de quelques Juifs portugais, allemands et polonais à M. de Voltaire*, I, 61, 227.

²⁰⁵ 'L'abbé Guénée, "secrétaire juif" contre Voltaire à l'occasion du *Traité sur la tolérance*', p.101.

²⁰⁶ *Lettres de quelques Juifs*, I, 3.

controversy that Albertan-Coppola proposes was marked by 'un certain estime' on the latter's part.²⁰⁷ And, as for Guénée, despite his criticism of Voltaire's discourse, he recognizes (again speaking in the name of the Jews) the benefits it has brought to the Jewish people:

Nous ne devons point le dissimuler: [...] le peuple juif vous a quelques obligations. [...] Si les autodafés de Madrid et de Lisbonne sont moins sanglants, si la rigueur du tribunal redoutable qui nous juge est enfin adoucie, c'est peut-être à vos écrits plus qu'à toute autre cause, que nous en sommes redevables. Vous avez du moins plus d'une fois exhorté les chrétiens à nous regarder comme leurs frères.²⁰⁸

While this study looks for an integration of Voltaire's Jewish writing with his promotion of universal tolerance, Katz finds that the Jewish discourse is an essential part of an alternative programme: the highly negative statements form part of Voltaire's personal drive for a natural religion. For Katz, Voltaire's vehement criticisms of the Jews are fundamental to his intentional demolition of accepted Christian teaching.

Criticism of the Bible by the Deists was not accompanied by hostile expressions toward the Jews and found no place in contemporary anti-Jewish propaganda. It had to be removed from its original context, given pungency, and directed toward a concrete target. The Deist doctrine underwent this process in the translation from the English version to the French; the primary translator and transformer was Voltaire.

But, despite this observation, Katz concludes that Voltaire could not have foreseen how later generations would interpret his writings, and he too credits him with the subsequent improvement in the Jewish social condition. He considers that, despite the unrestrained extremism of Voltaire's anti-Jewish discourse, despite the decisive influence he had on the attitudes towards the Jews and Judaism within his contemporary society, he 'did more than any other single man to shape the rationalistic trend that moved European society toward improving the status of the

²⁰⁷ 'L'abbé Guénée, "secrétaire juif" contre Voltaire à l'occasion du *Traité sur la tolérance*', p.100.

²⁰⁸ *Lettres de quelques Juifs*, I, 472.

Jews'.²⁰⁹

However, Katz's comment needs further examination when we consider that even in the eighteenth century Guénée and Pinto were able to foresee the possible dangers that the writer's immoderate language might – even if unwittingly – incur in the future. Pinto directly addresses the question of Voltaire's responsibility, the influence that he, like any other writer, might have on the thinking of subsequent generations. He accuses Voltaire of making remarks that appear misinformed, provocative and even unworthy of 'le plus grand génie du siècle le plus éclairé'. He contends that Voltaire's attacks against 'une nation déjà si malheureuse' are not just unwarranted, but also dangerous for the unknown effects they might create in those who encounter them. Thus, using the metaphor of persecution so favoured by Voltaire himself, he writes: 'Ce n'est pas tout de ne pas brûler les gens: on brûle avec la plume; et ce feu est d'autant plus cruel, que son effet passe aux générations futures.'²¹⁰

In reply to Pinto's letter, Voltaire acknowledges the violence and injustice of his discourse as found in 'Des Juifs', his fault in having attributed 'à toute une nation les vices de plusieurs particuliers' (21 July 1762).²¹¹ He promises to correct the text, to right the wrong – actions which he never carries out, although later in his *Un Chrétien contre six Juifs* (1776) he readdresses certain issues when answering the charges of the Abbé Guénée, who by this time had published Pinto's text as part of his own. But for Poliakov the 'antisemitic' Voltaire's response to Pinto shows an intentionally devious lack of sincerity. He writes that on that occasion 'son ironie se doublait de mauvaise foi polémique; il promettait au Juif d'amender les passages dont celui-ci se plaignait, mais il ne tint pas parole'.²¹² D.H. Jory finds another another reason for Voltaire's failure to correct his earlier comments: 'By the 1760's the plight of the Jews in France was serious, but they were no longer subject to judicial murder.' Voltaire was now 'trying to protect a more obviously threatened religious minority group – the Protestants. A busy man, Voltaire did not have time for everything.'²¹³

²⁰⁹ *From Prejudice to Destruction*, pp. 33-34.

²¹⁰ *Lettres de quelques juifs*, I, 25.

²¹¹ D10600.

²¹² *Histoire de l'antisémitisme*, p.107.

²¹³ 'Voltaire and the Jews of Metz', p.98.

While we cannot emphasize too much the difference between Voltaire's attitudes towards the Jews and modern antisemitism that culminated in the brutal intention to annihilate the Jewish people, Pinto's remark does suggest overtones that bring to mind Pierre Vidal-Naquet's criticism of Nazi *revisionnistes*; persecution can be achieved as much by the pen as by the sword, and a writer who deprives a community of its historical memory may be fittingly described as 'un Eichmann de papier' – through his writing an author may continue the process of persecution or extermination. Therefore further questions remain as to why Voltaire should have failed to rectify his comments in 'Des Juifs', particularly in light of his recognition of those faults that Pinto condemned. His late comments in *Un Chrétien contre six Juifs* attest to the fact that the issues and accusations raised by Pinto and Guénée continued to occupy him throughout his life; they were not just put out of mind. This latter text, written in his final years, was Voltaire's answer to the contention made by the Abbé in his *Lettres de quelques juifs*, his claim that the 'author' who was engaged in a war against the Jews was going to have to reply as 'son silence serait un aveu de sa défaite.'²¹⁴ But Voltaire's biased and prejudiced remarks levelled against the Jews in the 1756 text simply do not fit with his attitudes towards such unfair slander or prejudice against people in general. Bigotry and prejudice are the very things that he is fighting against. We can only presume, therefore, that while he most probably privately acknowledged the correctness of the comments made by such enlightened thinkers, Voltaire was reluctant to reduce his statements further for fear of undermining his project in favour of more liberal and secular attitudes as a whole. David Levy writes that 'avec Guénée, Voltaire a affaire à un adversaire de taille, à un polémiste redoutable', and Voltaire himself acknowledges to d'Alembert the wounding strength of Guénée's elegant criticisms, the way that 'like a monkey' 'il mord jusqu'au sang, en faisant semblant de baiser la main' (8 December 1776).²¹⁵

Many critics have pointed to the manipulative nature of Voltaire's writing, the way that he selects, discards and rearranges facts in order to transmit his message, an action for which he so severely criticizes the readers of the Bible. The manipulation of texts that he condemns in others is central to his drive to demean

²¹⁴ *Lettres de quelques juifs*, I, vi.

²¹⁵ *Voltaire et son exégèse du Pentateuque*, p.297; D20458.

that religious dogmatism which he finds in the biblical teachings. And the programme does not stop here; similar to his distorted presentation of the Jews is his portrayal of the Christians. While most groups on occasion are either drawn sympathetically in the role of victims, or are offered congratulation for their worthy actions, the Church itself is not presented in such positive terms. Voltaire admires many social and cultural aspects of European achievement, and in the religious field occasionally he gives praise where he sees it as due: he acknowledges the role played by certain non-conformist groups such as the Quakers, commends the religious enquiry found among some Protestant sects, and, moreover, with the passing of time increasingly praises the humanist qualities of Jesus the man. But, significantly, he makes minimal reference to any beneficial actions that the Church in power has performed in the name of its faith. For him, since he wishes to show the highly destructive nature of most religion, the representation of Catholicism (as of Judaism) cannot be softened by a non-essential reference to its own achievements.

Martha Augoustinos and Iain Walker explain how 'stereotypes are both a cause and a consequence of prejudice'; the danger lies in that they function not just as a description, but also as an explanation for the treatment of the outgroup by the ingroup. They attribute 'fixed and constitutional qualities to the target group and its members'.²¹⁶ But David Theo Goldberg proposes that a distinction should be drawn between critical and non-critical, rational and irrational stereotypes. He writes:

Stereotypes may be defined in neutral terms as those beliefs concerning the characteristics or attributes of persons in virtue of their group membership. Prejudice, by contrast, is a negative attitude or disposition towards others in virtue of the differential group membership. Prejudice will tend largely to employ negative stereotypes of other groups. But stereotypes need involve no prejudice. It should also be noted that prejudices may at times be justifiable or at least understandable.²¹⁷

However, Katz contends that the negative stereotypical fantasies which marked the Christians' 'sense of superiority, if not hatred, ridicule, and mockery' lie at the heart

²¹⁶ *Social Cognition*, p.208, p.226.

²¹⁷ *Racist Culture*, pp.122-23.

of Voltaire's discourse:

Voltaire's image of the Jews was that harbored by the Christian mind for generations; a species alienated from the community, strange in language and customs, sunk in obscurantism and adhering to an anachronistic tradition, devoted to their brethren in the extreme but hostile to those around them, with whom they have no contact other than in business dealings, usury, and dishonest trade.²¹⁸

But Schwarzbach goes some way towards Goldberg's suggestion, requiring us to explore the dangerous notion of 'a kernel of truth': he suggests in his turn that the sometimes malevolent and exaggerated representations of the Jews by Voltaire and Diderot mirror their own resentments based on personal experience. Jewish involvement in usury was a historical fact, but a fact whose origin in Christian laws was left out of account; in Christian minds it became convenient 'to emphasize the role of the Jews and stereotype Jews as the archetypal usurer'.²¹⁹ Pomeau sets out Voltaire's approaches to Jewish bankers and moneylenders:

Après la faillite de ses banquiers d'Acosta et Medina, à Londres, en 1726, Voltaire ne renonça pas à employer les services d'hommes d'affaires juifs. En Prusse, il spécula sur les actions de la Steuer par l'intermédiaire du joaillier Hirschell (1750). Quelques mois plus tard, il est en relations avec 'messieurs Ephraïm', de Berlin, correspondants du 'sieur Moses' à Amsterdam

(14 April 1752).²²⁰

Fenichel, in line with Augoustinos and Walker's view, shows how the ghetto which resulted from persecution became an excuse for the Jews' further persecution; he sets out the 'reasons' for the treatment that the Jews have received from others:

The obstinacy with which the Jews have resisted assimilation through the ages [...] is obviously due (1) to the ghetto system, which excluded the Jews artificially from full participation in the cultural life of the host nations [...] and (2) to a stubborn acceptance of the

²¹⁸ *From Prejudice to Destruction*, p.44.

²¹⁹ Gavin Langmuir, *Toward a Definition of Antisemitism*, p.10.

²²⁰ *Candide* (1959), p.282, note 3.

ghetto system by the Jews themselves.²²¹

The evidence of physical and social separation became symbolized by the barriers at the entrance to the ghettos, barriers that both enclosed and excluded. Similarly Schwarzbach suggests that the perception of the Jews as 'antisocial' may have been affected by the way they led their lives, that is dictated by the rabbinic laws, and their reaction to the attitudes of the non-Jews with whom they came in contact. As the Jews' isolation became more pronounced, they became 'plus redoutés, [...] plus haïs et maltraités, physiquement et économiquement'. According to Schwarzbach, while the particularly reduced circumstances in which the Jews (mainly Ashkenazi) lived were a result of the treatment the latter received from the Christians, this causality was only partially acknowledged by the authors who attributed the Jews' alleged 'sickliness' and 'unhealthiness' 'à la surpopulation de leurs quartiers'.²²²

Voltaire himself introduces the dilemma that twentieth-century critics have faced when seeking to assess his responsibility for later anti-Jewish attitudes and persecutory acts against the Jews. Should we be deemed responsible for unforeseen effects of our actions? Voltaire cannot be accused for not knowing what we know today, the unfolding of the historic suppression of the Jews, from conversion to expulsion and thence, in our own period, to attempted annihilation.²²³ Recognizing the impossibility for one generation to foresee the future events of another, to predict the results of its actions, he states:

Si on avait dit alors à Luther qu'il détruirait la religion romaine dans la moitié de l'Europe, il ne l'aurait pas cru; il alla plus loin qu'il ne pensait, comme il arrive dans toutes les disputes et dans presque toutes les affaires. (1756)

Similarly he stresses how those of earlier times would have been unable to conceive the depths of brutality to which their descendents would sink; how an act of tolerance such as that of the ancient Romans – the freedoms they extended to the early Christians – would perhaps one day make it possible for the heirs of the early Church to perpetrate their deeds of savage intolerance. Thus, praising the tolerant

²²¹ 'Elements of a Psychoanalytic Theory of Anti-Semitism', p.339.

²²² 'Une nation reniée – une nation adoptée' p.350, p.355.

²²³ See Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews*, I, 8-9.

laws instigated by Locke in Carolina, he writes:

Ces lois semblèrent admirables, après les torrents de sang que l'esprit d'intolérance avait répandus dans l'Europe; mais on n'aurait pas seulement songé à faire de telles lois chez les Grecs and chez les Romains, qui ne soupçonnèrent jamais qu'il pût arriver un temps où les hommes voudraient forcer, le fer à la main, d'autres hommes à croire. (1761)²²⁴

His relation-separation of Roman tolerance and Christian intolerance underlines the problems faced by all generations; the uncontrollable character of the effect of their actions on those of their successors. Complicated social changes and changes in knowledge obfuscate far-reaching decisions distinguishing right from wrong. Despite their often honourable aims, men fail through the unpredictability of the future, and not knowing what they do, start something new that may promote or encourage later, unintended disastrous events. Voltaire's Enlightenment 'project' could only hope to foster improvements in the human lot as he knew it: 'Les progrès de la raison sont lents, les racines des préjugés sont profondes. Je ne verrai pas, sans doute, les fruits de mes efforts; mais ce seront des semences qui peut-être germeront un jour' (8 January 1764). His faith (such as it was) in the good potential of human reason could not extend to future social conditions as yet unpredictable, distant effects of countless intervening changes, including the pseudo-scientific theory of race and the elaboration of an unheard-of, undreamed-of 'technology of death'. Such an evolution, a collective and largely unintentional process, cannot be, or be attributed to, the project of any one individual. It is inadmissible to suppose that Voltaire could have 'dreamt' or 'suspected' the fanatical acting-out to which European anti-Jewish attitudes would descend in the twentieth century.²²⁵

However, even if Voltaire did not foresee the depths to which modern-day antisemitism would plummet, he should have known that his often vituperative writing addressing the Jews was bound to foster the anti-Jewish prejudice that had existed for centuries. But at the same time, even while accepting the popular contention that Voltaire's writing becomes ever more critical towards the Judaic religion, this thesis argues that after his crisis years the discourse loses its

²²⁴ *Essai sur les mœurs*, II, 284, 418.

²²⁵ D11631 to Elie Bertrand.

hallucinatory or vitriolic tone as regards the Jewish people. I do not find evidence of the 'grande ferveur antisémite' that Poliakov discovers reflected in Voltaire's writing during the last period of his life.²²⁶ The intentional and stereotypical attribution of individual vices to all Jews, to which the writer had admitted in his correspondence with Pinto, does not continue to be a driving force for Voltaire. From the 1760s his discourse repeatedly refers to the false calumnies still spread by the Christians against the Jews, the inhuman victimization of them, and the admirable, while for him paradoxical, tolerance of the Jewish people themselves. Whether or not Guénée and others are justified in contending that Voltaire's assertion of Jewish tolerance was a pragmatic measure in order further to promote his universal programme, throughout Voltaire's life this figure recurs frequently, not just in the public but also in the private discourse. In his notebooks he describes the behaviour of the Jews as a 'bel exemple de tolérance' (1735-50?),²²⁷ and later writing to d'Alembert, comments that despite all the atrocities of the Bible, despite the supposedly uncivilized nature of Jews of the past 'ce même peuple pourtant donne les plus grands exemples de tolérance'. He adds:

il souffre dans son sein une secte accréditée de gens qui ne croient ni à l'immortalité de l'âme ni aux anges. Il a des pontifes de cette secte. Trouvez-moi sur le reste de la terre une plus forte preuve de tolérantisme dans un gouvernement. Oui, les Juifs ont été aussi indulgents que barbares; il y en cent exemples frappants: c'est cette énorme contradiction qu'il fallait développer.

(13 February 1764)²²⁸

Similarly, on the 4 March 1764, writing to Damilaville in a way that reverses the representation of a negative Jewish causality, he condemns the Christians for having willingly adopted the brutal texts of the Old Testament, while failing to learn from the Jews' more positive behaviour;

On ne peut être plus atroce et plus barbare que cette nation, cela est vrai; mais si on trouve des exemples incontestables de la plus grande tolérance chez ce peuple abominable, quelle leçon

²²⁶ *Histoire de l'antisémitisme*, p.115.

²²⁷ 'Leningrad Notebook', *Notebooks*, I, 399.

²²⁸ D11695.

pour des peuples qui se vantent d'avoir de la politesse et de la douceur!²²⁹

Gilman questions 'the supposed difference between "anti-Judaism" and "anti-Semitism" in the history of the treatment of Jews in Europe', and argues that 'we are dealing with shifts in the articulation of perception, not the basic perception itself'.²³⁰ Dennis Prager and Joseph Telushkin diminish the separation; they contend that the roots of antisemitism are found in Judaism, 'its distinctiveness and its challenges'.²³¹ Langmuir, while accepting that antisemitism is a 'most misleading term', claims that since the Middle Ages 'anti-Judaism and antisemitism would coexist and be mutually reinforcing'. He suggests that 'whether or not one thinks the terms denote markedly different kinds of hostility depends largely on whether one thinks that Jews were primarily responsible for the hostility or that non-Jews were'. Following these comments, I find that Voltaire's hallucinatory writing of the 1750s about the Jews often consists of what Langmuir describes as 'chimerical assertions', and so we might, using the term in its loosest and non-historical sense, here accuse Voltaire of 'antisemitic bias' – although at this time he adopts similarly irrational language when speaking of the Christians and, we must emphasize, does not advocate violence against either group. But in his other more rational periods his remarks are in tune with those he makes about all peoples; they should be held responsible for their own wrongful behaviour, but exonerated from that which is not their own fault. In what Bayard might term his more 'successful' works, Voltaire's attack concentrates on the teachings and traditions of the Judaic scriptures, and on those who *in his view* foolishly or deviously hold them as sacred. Here, I propose, his criticism can legitimately be labelled as marked by anti-Judaism. Yet we must also concede that distinctions between anti-Judaism, anti-Jewishness and/or what today we call 'antisemitism', whether or not consciously or unconsciously intended by the writer, may easily lose definition for those who cannot or will not see such separations. For this reason I find that the continued rashness of Voltaire's discourse, one capable of perpetuating prejudice or even inciting violence, deserves Pinto's courteous reproach.²³²

²²⁹ D11747.

²³⁰ *Jewish Self-Hatred*, p.2.

²³¹ *Why the Jews?*, p.12.

²³² *Toward a Definition of Antisemitism*, p.351, p.62, p.5.

* * *

Christian presumed identity

In the field of Christian identity Voltaire himself is inevitably included, and the tonality of his critique changes accordingly. Besides, when reading his texts regarding the Christians, we have to remain particularly aware of the added social pressures. With the constant threat of persecution by the authorities of the Church and State, when attacking the Christians in particular he was obliged at times to moderate or to disguise his arguments. As Deidre Dawson points out, remembering the non-private nature of correspondence in the eighteenth century, we also have to remain aware of the possible separation between the *destinataire explicite* and the *destinataire implicite* of all letters, and of the intentional double message that the writer might be trying to convey, in part for the stated recipient, and in part for any wider unknown public. But, in the case of the Christians, Voltaire's condemnation is especially severe, his criticism particularly vehement, partly as a result of his personal place among this group, and partly because of the experiences he has suffered within that group. Like the Jews depicted in his texts, he is the victimizer who has also been victimized.

While the Christians have constructed for themselves an identity founded on their alleged civilization, their position of power, their sense of superiority and supposed undeniable authority, Voltaire undermines this status. He contextualizes them in the area of human weakness and failure and he seeks again to show that while culture 'produces different fruits', 'ce qui tient intimement à la nature humaine se ressemble d'un bout de l'univers à l'autre' (1756). For him, all human nature is fundamentally the same: 'le fonds est partout le même' (1756).²³³ Therefore, despite his faith in the allegedly different origins of ethnic groups, he indicates that all mankind belongs to a shared humanity. This thinking reappears in the *Sermon du Rabbin Akib* (1761) where he presents all difference of colour and custom as irrelevant.²³⁴

²³³ *Essai sur les mœurs*, III, 182 (cf. II, 363).

²³⁴ *Sermon du Rabbin Akib*, pp.280-81.

Voltaire stresses how Christians continue to judge others by criteria they claim as their own, by their ideas of what is right and wrong, judgements based on a particular interpretation of morality, and not on the universal, and so he declares: ‘nous devons être en garde contre notre habitude de juger tout par nos usages’ (1756). More critically still, this characteristic of misplaced pride becomes manifest in the religious dimension; the world must be ‘persuaded’ to accept the Christians’ teachings and persecuted when it fails to emulate their example. Finding such an attitude embodying ferocious aggression and disputatiousness absent from most other faiths, Voltaire contends that while the Islamic religion ‘ne s’est établie que par les armes’ and the Mohammedans ‘ont eu leurs missionnaires aux Indes et à la Chine’ (1756), among the peoples of his own times the spirit of savage proselytism is found only among the followers of the Christian faith.²³⁵

In a deliberate departure from the prevailing Eurocentricism, Voltaire contends that the Europeans are unattractive to those with whom they have come in contact, both in physical appearance and in customs. But more importantly still, by their very nature they have appalled other peoples, thereby restricting the spread of their religion and culture. He emphasizes how divisions between Christian groups have rendered Christ’s teachings incomprehensible to those that his followers wish to convert. Repeating his figure of the Jews, Voltaire represents the Christians – even while allegedly on Christ’s missionary work overseas – as hating and hated:

C’est même le concours de ces nations [chrétiennes] qui a nui au progrès de notre culte.

Comme elles se haïssent toutes, et que plusieurs d’entre elles se font souvent la guerre dans ces climats, elles y ont fait haïr ce qu’elles enseignent. [...] Le catholique y combat l’anglican, qui combat le luthérien combattu par le calviniste. Ainsi tous contre tous, voulant annoncer chacun la vérité, et accusant les autres de mensonges, ils étonnent un peuple simple et paisible.

(1761)

By representing Christianity in terms of this continued mutual discord, by stressing the disunity among the different sects of the Church, Voltaire undermines the very assumption of a Christian selfhood.²³⁶

²³⁵ *Essai sur les mœurs*, I, 208; III, 182.

²³⁶ *Essai sur les mœurs*, I, 195-96.

Thus, while he partly constructs an identity for the Jews on their allegedly self-confessed hatred of others, a desire to remain apart from other peoples, Voltaire creates an image of Christian identity based on a hypocritical and false representation of charity. He sets out the dichotomy between the claims and the realities of religious charity:

charité dont la théologie s'est approprié le nom, comme s'il n'appartient qu'à elle, mais dont elle a proscrit trop souvent la réalité; charité, amour du genre humain, vertu inconnue aux trompeurs, aux pédants qui argumentent, aux fanatiques qui persécutent. (1766)²³⁷

He intentionally creates a separation between the Christians and others, but one that reverses the usual contemporary understanding of their differences; the alleged spirit of charity and humanity by which they define themselves is revealed to belong not to the followers of Christ, but to those whom the Church seeks to convert. The Quakers prove the sole exception to Christian uncharitableness: 'Il semble que la loi d'aimer son prochain comme soi-même n'ait été faite que pour ces gens-là' (1764).²³⁸ So, in his sermon the rabbi states: 'Vous savez que quand les musulmans eurent conquis toute l'Espagne par leur cimiterre, ils ne molestèrent personne, ne contraignirent personne à changer de religion, et qu'ils traitèrent les vaincus avec humanité aussi bien que nous autres israélites' (1761).²³⁹ Similarly, Voltaire shows how the Turks treat with humanity the various Christian sects in their midst, an example that has not been emulated by the people of Portugal in their dealings with religious others.

Although claiming to love mankind as brothers, the Christians in fact hate and persecute all those who hold different opinions and beliefs. This development of Christian thinking Voltaire links to their growth in power, and he thus dismantles the notion of an authority founded on a moral superiority and the increase of enlightenment. In place of the self-claimed mark of identity founded on charity, he introduces a dual figure representative of absence, one that emphasizes the Christians' non-existent authoritarian right, and their non-existent benevolence on which that supposed right is based. Voltaire contends: 'Dès que les chrétiens furent

²³⁷ *Avis au public*, p.537.

²³⁸ 'Catéchisme du Japonais', p.494.

²³⁹ *Sermon du Rabbin Akib*, p.280.

les maîtres, ils oublièrent le précepte de Jésus et de tant de philosophes, de pardonner à leurs ennemis' (1777). He traces the figure of Christian failure to follow the peaceable teachings of Jesus back to the earliest years of Christianity, showing how hatred marked its early ambitions, its desire to abolish all faith that did not adhere to its own. This introduces his argument as to the fundamental difference between the Jews and the followers of the early Church:

Si donc on laissa ce peuple [les Juifs] en paix à Rome, c'est qu'il n'insultait point aux lois de l'empire; et si on punit quelques chrétiens, c'est qu'ils voulaient détruire la religion de l'État, et qu'ils brûlaient les temples quand ils le pouvaient. (1777)²⁴⁰

Even while Voltaire repeatedly portrays the two groups, Jews and early Christians, as virtually indistinguishable, peoples originating from the same tradition and the same ethnic minority, simultaneously he marks out their difference in terms of the tolerance of the former, and the intolerance of the latter; since the beginnings of actual recorded history – outside the world of what Voltaire sees as biblical 'mythology' – the tolerance of the Jews has enabled them to live in peace, while the intolerance of the Christians has destroyed, and continues to destroy, the well-being of the State. Here the characteristic so often attributed to the Jews has become reinscribed in more favourable terms; Jewish exclusiveness is markedly different in its peaceable nature from the inclusiveness of the Christians that is driven by belligerence. Jews peacefully separate themselves from their other, while Christians aggressively seek to convert the other to the same. These figures do not just contradict the view accepted in Voltaire's contemporary European society, but more importantly demolish the unarguable authority that it claims to possess.

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Sermon des cinquante

In the *Sermon des cinquante* Voltaire undermines the very bedrock of Christian identity by setting out to demolish the Christian faith itself. The illogicalities that he finds present in its texts, beliefs and dogmas lead him to

²⁴⁰ *Histoire de l'établissement du christianisme*, p.92, pp.82-83.

contend that there will be 'pas besoin de tant de preuves pour ruiner ce malheureux édifice'. He declares that the early Christians, the 'demi-Juifs', like the Jews before them, belonged to 'the dregs' of society, and that they constructed their faith in order to 'se distinguer de la populace'. Thus he dismantles the presumed superiority of the Christians by uniting them with the Jewish people, not just in a historical, religious tradition, but also in their social degradation and deprived state. Their identity allegedly contained in a separate essence, as with the Jews, is in fact founded purely on a self-determined difference.²⁴¹

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'Juifs'

At the same time as Voltaire emphasizes how the Christian tradition has grown out of the Jewish faith, how the early believers were converts from Judaism, in the third section of 'Juifs' he stresses the inconsistent pragmatism that has marked the treatment meted out to the Jews by the Church. The actions of the latter have been dictated by self-serving ambition and greed, at times using the Jews to achieve its own ends, at others promoting conversion, expulsion, persecution and even death. Voltaire emphasizes the paradoxical separation/non-separation that both unites and divides the two groups; he portrays their individual identities founded on a mutual dependence. He relates the suffering of the Jews to the actions of the Christians, and thereby invests the perceived identity of the Jews, that marked by errancy and diaspora, with a non-Jewish responsibility; their perpetuated vagrancy and non-belonging is the fault of those who continue to reject them. The identity of the wandering outsiders comes from their persecutors, while that of the latter is found in the brutality that they perpetrate on their victimized other. Laclau, taking on the voice of the victimized, declares: 'to be oppressed is part of my identity as a subject struggling for emancipation; without the presence of the oppressor my identity would be different.'²⁴²

Voltaire's texts repeatedly refer to Christ's Jewishness, and his notebooks relate a conversation between Madame Acosta and the Abbé who wished to

²⁴¹ *Sermon des cinquante*, p.449.

²⁴² *Emancipation(s)*, p.17.

convert her. She asked if Christ was born a Jew, lived a Jew, and died a Jew, and when the answer was always in the affirmative, she responded: 'Well then be a Jew' (1735-50?).²⁴³ This dialogue introduces the tension at the heart of the Judeo-Christian understanding, the ambivalence of the two religions' relationship which is founded on 'une coupure-lien, en résonance avec les coupures-liens qui animent toute "identité"'.²⁴⁴ Voltaire constantly seeks to undermine Christian identity by his reiteration of Jesus' adherence to Jewish laws, and in *L'Ingenu* (1767) he satirizes the paradoxical connection/separation between the two religions when he portrays the ingenuous Huron's ready expectation of circumcision following his conversion to Christianity. Voltaire discovers in this same mutilating ritual a key to the Judeo-Christian relationship. His campaign against religious intolerance had to be conducted with caution; he certainly had to be careful when tackling the crucial theological difference, the opposed beliefs on the spiritual issue of whether or not Christ was the Messiah. So fixing his attentions on the indubitable empirical reality of circumcision was his uniquely Voltairean solution, releasing all the energy of his gift for derision.

Voltaire constantly re-emphasizes this arbitrary distinction between Christians and Jews, a unified topic of difference between them, and one which he consistently treats as imaginary, meaning non-existent or so slight as not worth stressing, and one that certainly is not a worthy pretext for limitless violence. He comments that 'today' such issues are of too little significance to continue to incite bitter disputes between the two groups:

Je sais que l'instrument ou prépuçé, ou déprépuçé, a causé des querelles bien funestes. [...] Mais après tout, je ne crois pas qu'aujourd'hui le prépuce doive produire de si abominables horreurs: je ne pense pas surtout que les hommes doivent se haïr, se détester, s'anathématiser, se damner réciproquement le samedi et le dimanche pour un petit bout de chair de plus ou de moins.

(1771)²⁴⁵

Here the emphasis on difference symbolized by the physical marker of circumcision or non-circumcision is linked to another, for Voltaire equally

²⁴³ 'Leningrad Notebooks', p.365.

²⁴⁴ Daniel Sibony, *Le 'racisme', une haine identitaire*, p.144.

²⁴⁵ 'Juifs', p.528.

arbitrary, marker of difference: the day chosen to celebrate the Sabbath. This figure becomes emphasized in the farcical representation of the days allotted to the Grand Inquisitor and to Don Issachar to avail themselves of the 'rights' to Cunégonde, whether the night belongs 'to the old law or to the new', a reference that allows Voltaire to carry the figure over to the further one of violence.²⁴⁶ In the *Sermon du Rabbin Akib* he links the issues raised by the acceptance or rejection of all such religious tenets with acts of savage religious brutality. The rabbi, condemning the *auto-da-fé*, declares:

Deux musulmans ont été livrés aux tourments les plus cruels, parce que leurs pères et leurs grands-pères avaient un peu moins de prépuce que les Portugais, qu'ils se lavaient trois fois par jour, tandis que les Portugais ne se lavent qu'une fois par semaine. (1761)²⁴⁷

Here we find another example of the way Voltaire uses ridicule, this time directed not against the Jews, but against the Christians. Their rejection of certain practices – in this case ritual washing – now becomes invested with a representation of the unclean, thus indicating that the figure has been translated from the circumcised outsider to the supposedly civilized subject of Christian Europe. Such mockery of ritual Voltaire repeats in the article 'Secte', where re-emphasizing the (what is for him) non-significance of all ridiculous religious beliefs and practices, he writes:

toute la terre siffle celui qui prétend qu'on ne peut plaire à Dieu qu'en tenant à sa mort une queue de vache, et celui qui veut qu'on se fasse couper un bout de prépuce, et celui qui consacre des crocodiles et des oignons, et celui qui attache le salut éternel à des os de morts qu'on porte sous sa chemise, ou à une indulgence plénière qu'on achète à Rome pour deux sous et demi. (1765)²⁴⁸

In the vitriolic second section of 'Juifs' found among the private papers, Voltaire mocks all so-called sacrifices carried out by peoples across the world, 'ceremonies' that 'prouvent que le genre humain est capable de tout'. He incorporates the Jews in all such universal practices, and further reduces the

²⁴⁶ *Candide*, pp.145-46.

²⁴⁷ *Sermon du Rabbin Akib*, p.280.

²⁴⁸ 'Secte', pp.520-21.

significance of these with the comment: 'Les Cafres, qui se coupent un testicule, sont encore un bien plus ridicule exemple des excès de la superstition' (undated).²⁴⁹ This figure is repeated in the *Essai sur les mœurs* where he writes that among the Hottentots a similar operation has been performed since time immemorial, 'sans que ces peuples sachent pourquoi et comment cette coutume s'est introduite parmi eux'. Then with biting sarcasm that reduces all ritual to irrationality, he adds: 'Il est certain qu'ils n'en peuvent rendre qu'une mauvaise raison; et c'est l'origine de bien des usages dans le reste de la terre' (1761).²⁵⁰ This relating of ritual to the 'uncivilized', reappears some years later when, with particular mocking reference to circumcision, Voltaire again brings together all such ceremonies. In *Un Chrétien contre six Juifs*, referring to his fictional 'friend', he writes: 'je vous jure qu'à son âge et au mien nous ne prenons aucun parti ni pour les nations prépuçières, ni pour les nations déprépuçées, ni pour les châtrés, ni pour les entiers, ni pour les voisins du cap de Bonne-Espérance' (1777). Thus, attacking on two levels, he condemns the brutality of physical mutilation, and reduces to senselessness and unreason any markers of identity, those of omission as well as those of commission.²⁵¹

In the same vein, in 'Juifs' Voltaire demolishes the deeper foundations of the significance given to the rite of circumcision by his mocking comment to the Jews that he has been their servant, their friend, their brother 'quoique mon père et ma mère m'eussent conservé mon prépuce' (1771). Addressing a public reared in the Christian tradition, he proposes that the issue is not that of circumcision alone. Non-circumcision is every bit as ritualistic as circumcision: difference becomes a matter of indifference, and the Christians and Jews are indistinguishable. Voltaire reasserts that violence is not triggered by these markers of difference, but by their close complementarity in the Jewish-Christian relationship, a complementarity of rejection by each group of the other. The underlying logic of his condemnation lies in the figure of the two groups hating one another for imaginary differences that do not belong to reality, because in fact the groups depend on one another for their very identities; they are, each for the other, their self-other relationship and it is this relationship which is their only unity.²⁵² As Douglas writes:

²⁴⁹ 'Juifs', p.522.

²⁵⁰ *Essai sur les mœurs*, II, 360.

²⁵¹ *Un Chrétien contre six Juifs*, p.559.

²⁵² 'Juifs', p.528.

If two symbolic systems are confronted, they begin to form, even by their opposition, a single whole. In this totality each half may be represented to the other by a single element which is made to jump out of context to perform this role.

In Voltaire's interpretation, circumcision/non-circumcision is the element that represents the separation. His discourse repeats in reverse the Jews' and Christians' reversal of sameness into difference, and makes use of the traditional identification of the two religions to pass off his critique of Christianity as a figure of Jewish exclusivity. But the two groups are not reduced to the *same* by his rhetoric; some can only be identified as 'prépuciers' because others practise circumcision. And while the critique cannot come from outside the Jewish-Christian complementarity, the singular value of Voltaire's argument, as well as its inescapable fragility, lies in his belonging to 'la nation prépuçière'.²⁵³

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Essai sur les mœurs and La Philosophie de l'histoire

Again asserting that the Christian inheritance of the Judaic religious texts and practices excludes just one ritual, which thus acquires the status of marker *par excellence* of the distinction between Jews and Christians, in the *Essai sur les mœurs* he writes: 'Ce peuple doit nous intéresser, puisque nous tenons d'eux notre religion, plusieurs même de nos lois et de nos usages.' Once more Voltaire stresses the tension in Judeo-Christian thinking, emphasizing the 'interest' that one has for the other, an interest based on their shared religious tradition. But he then again reduces the difference by remarking that 'nous ne sommes au fond que des Juifs avec un prépuce' (1769). He traces the origins of the desire to mark out that difference from the time of the early Christians – those 'demi-juifs, demi-chrétiens' – who were confused with the Jews, by reason of their sharing many customs and practices: 'on les confondait avec les Juifs, parce qu'ils étaient leurs compatriotes, parlant la même langue, s'abstenant comme eux des aliments défendus par la loi mosaïque' (1756). Thus the early indistinguishable Christians felt driven to take 'le

²⁵³ *Natural Symbols*, pp.43-44.

nom de chrétiens' (1769). Voltaire gives the Christians' intentional separation from the Jews as a reason for the hatred allegedly felt by the latter for the new sect: 'Leur haine pour les chrétiens, ou galiléens, ou nazaréens, comme on les nommait alors, tenait de cette rage dont tous les superstitieux sont animés contre tous ceux qui se séparent de leur communion' (1756). Even though divisions soon occurred among the early disputatious followers of Christ, 'les véritables Juifs étaient les ennemis irréconciliables de tous ces partis' (1769).²⁵⁴ Judeo-Christian hatred originated in those particular tensions found 'entre identités très proches, entre "frères"' .²⁵⁵

Voltaire then takes his criticism still further. He introduces a figure that unites the Christians and the Jews in their common arrogance and mistaken thinking: 'Notre ignorante crédulité se figure toujours que nous avons tout inventé, que tout est venu des Juifs et de nous, qui avons succédé aux Juifs' (1769). But, undermining Judeo-Christian claims of authority, founded partly on a (for Voltaire) mistakenly held antiquity, he concludes: 'De quelque côté que nous nous tournions, il faut avouer que nous n'existons que d'hier' (1756) – he removes antiquity as a ground for authority. But here, while he takes away from the Jews their special identity defined by such allegedly false claims to an ancient history, at the same time he reverses the argument and invests the members of Christendom with an authority not just independent of these, but, more importantly, one actually supported by their absence. The Jews, because of their allegedly recent past, are denied such authority, while, for the same reason, that very status is afforded to the Europeans. He writes: 'Nous allons plus loin que les autres peuples en plus d'un genre; et c'est peut-être parce que nous sommes venus les derniers' (1756).²⁵⁶

But the image Voltaire creates of the European is not a static one based on a conception of the polarized self/other relationship that prioritizes the first term; he shows that the Christian self – like that of all other groups – contains strangeness, ambiguity and inconsistency. He understands that 'étrangement, l'étranger nous habite: il est la face cachée de notre identité'. The European self, like all others, 'se révèle comme un étrange pays de frontières et d'altérités sans cesse construites et

²⁵⁴ *Essai sur les mœurs*, II, 162; I, 223-24.

²⁵⁵ Daniel Sibony, *Le 'racisme', une haine identitaire*, p.125.

²⁵⁶ *Essai sur les mœurs*, I, 199, 215.

déconstruites'.²⁵⁷ But Fenichel, while affirming that 'one's own unconscious is also foreign', shows that it is the presence of this stranger in the European self that has given rise to antisemitism with its attempted projection on to the Jewish outsider of the unacknowledged qualities found in the self. He writes: 'Foreignness is the quality which the Jews and one's own instincts have in common.'²⁵⁸

Voltaire's discourse is highly mobile and he constantly dismantles his own argument, thereby obliging the reader to reconsider his own thinking. So, although, at times, he represents the Europeans as superior in most aspects of modern life, and portrays them as the yardstick against which all peoples should be compared, at others, he reverses the usual thinking of his own society, showing how fault lies on the side of the argumentative and war-mongering members of Christendom who slander those who do not belong to their own group.

Nous avons calomnié les Chinois, uniquement parce que leur métaphysique n'est pas la nôtre; nous aurions dû admirer en eux deux mérites qui condamnent à la fois les superstitions des païens et les mœurs des chrétiens. Jamais la religion des lettrés ne fut déshonorée par des fables, ni souillée par des querelles et des guerres civiles.

Thus, even while presenting the Chinese as an 'espèce d'hommes, si différente de la nôtre' (1756), behind Europe in the sciences, and incapable, as he contends, of certain skills found among the Europeans, he declares they are 'toujours supérieurs dans la morale' (1756). Their admirable appreciation of the laws would cause them to be astounded were they to witness some of the actions of the Christian world. Addressing his fellow Europeans, Voltaire summarizes that the Christians' misjudgements of others have come about because 'we' have indeed judged them by our standards, and because 'nous portons au bout du monde les préjugés de notre esprit contentieux' (1756).²⁵⁹

So too, even though indicating the supposedly special merits of the peoples of Europe, such as the progress of their sciences that have allegedly surpassed those of Asia, and even though stating that the peoples of the north have proved to be

²⁵⁷ Julia Kristeva, *Étrangers à nous-mêmes*, p.9, p.283.

²⁵⁸ 'Elements of a Psychoanalytic Theory of Anti-Semitism', p.341.

²⁵⁹ *Essai sur les mœurs*, I, 178, 173; II, 433; I, 178.

superior to those of the south, he further dismantles his argument with the comment that 'en général, les hommes du Midi oriental ont reçu de la nature des mœurs plus douces que les peuples de notre Occident'. This has led all travellers to concede that the character of the people of India 'n'a rien de cette inquiétude, de cette pétulance, et de cette dureté, qu'on a eu tant de peine à contenir chez les nations du Nord'. Contending that 'le physique de l'Inde différant en tant de choses du nôtre, il fallait bien que le moral différât aussi', he then declares: 'Leurs vices étaient plus doux que les nôtres' (1761). Giving further weight to this demolition of a Eurocentric notion of superiority, Voltaire shows the non-mutual dependence between the Europeans and the people of India.

Nos peuples occidentaux ont fait éclater dans toutes ces découvertes une grande supériorité d'esprit et de courage sur les nations orientales. [...] Mais la nature leur avait donné sur nous un avantage qui balance tous les nôtres: c'est qu'elles n'avaient nul besoin de nous et que nous avions besoin d'elles. (1756)

He emphasizes the mistaken arrogance of the West and reveals its thinking not as a standard for the universal, but as an undesired, unaspired-to example of the particular.²⁶⁰

The Christians are thus represented as the opposite of those non-Europeans so often at the time portrayed as less civilized. For Voltaire, while all humanity is brutal, the people of Europe are more savage than those of the East. This fury 'entre bien moins dans le caractère des peuples de l'Inde et de la Chine que dans le nôtre' (1756). Stressing his intention to reject the received opinions and to resist the common prejudices, he presents an alternative truth. He shows how in a complete reversal the Christians – with the sole exception of the Quakers or Anabaptists – have forgotten the peaceful teachings of Christ and have taken to a course of savage intolerance, whereas the followers of Islam have moved from their allegedly violent beginnings to a policy of tolerance and indulgence. He writes:

Bornons-nous toujours à cette vérité historique: le législateur des musulmans, homme puissant

²⁶⁰ *Essai sur les mœurs*, I, 189; II, 373.

et terrible, établit ses dogmes par son courage et par ses armes; cependant sa religion devint indulgente et tolérante. L'instituteur divin du christianisme, vivant dans l'humilité et dans la paix, prêcha le pardon des outrages; et sa sainte et douce religion est devenue, pas nos fureurs, la plus intolérante de toutes. (1761)²⁶¹

Furthermore, by representing the ancient Romans as tolerant in their treatment of all sects who did not disrupt the stability of the state, Voltaire is able to attribute to the Christians a lasting characteristic of disputatiousness, one existing from earliest to most recent times. Within the more contemporary framework he shows the full implication of this accusation by underlining the destructive results brought about by the devious investigative procedures of the Inquisition, actions that created a situation in which 'il n'y eut plus d'amis, plus de société' and 'le frère craignit son frère, le père, son fils' (1756). The Church's continued destruction of society points to what is, for Voltaire, its enduring criminal nature. But when contending that the Romans showed tolerance to those living throughout their empire, Voltaire makes the dismissive comment that they looked on the Jews 'du même œil que nous voyons les Nègres, comme une espèce d'hommes inférieure' (1761).²⁶²

Voltaire's thinking on the different peoples of the world, mostly known to those of the West through the unreliable reports of travellers, missionaries, traders, and soldiers, not only reflected the ignorance of his times, but also rested on a belief in the probability of multigenesis, a theory that caused him to place individual groups at various levels on a hierarchical scale. So describing black men as an 'espèce d'hommes différente de la nôtre', he writes that 'on peut dire que si leur intelligence n'est pas d'une autre espèce que notre entendement, elle est fort inférieure' (1761). But, even while suspending judgment on this reference to the myth of white superiority, we find that Voltaire uses this same figure to launch a fierce attack on the Christians. Reporting the alleged religious practices of the Church during the eleventh century, he writes: 'A n'envisager que les coutumes que je viens de rapporter, on croirait voir le portrait des Nègres et des Hottentots; et il faut avouer qu'en plus d'une chose nous n'avons pas été supérieurs à eux'

²⁶¹ *Essai sur les mœurs*, III, 180; I, 221.

²⁶² *Essai sur les mœurs*, II, 351; I, 223.

(1756).²⁶³ A similar indictment of Christian brutality also appears in his letter of the 24 October 1761 to d'Argental: 'Abominables chrétiens, les nègres que vous achetez douze cents francs valent douze cents fois mieux que vous!' Thus he shows that European particularism, even while relating to the universal, has no moral claim to define it.²⁶⁴

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Candide

In *Candide* Voltaire again addresses the notion of confused identity in the Christians, emphasizing the separation between their actions and the specious claims of charity and humanity on which their identity is based. He draws attention to the way their hypocrisy conceals manipulative intent; this becomes manifest in the devious actions of the Inquisitor who commands an *auto-da-fé*. This ceremony, created by the Church in order 'to save souls', for Voltaire embodies alleged Christian charity in its most spurious form. But the fictional event has an even more illegitimate and malicious purpose. While the Inquisitor sets it in motion ostensibly to quell the earthquake, it soon becomes clear that his more personal aim is to intimidate his rival, Don Issachar. The full significance for Voltaire of this figure of corrupt private ambition dressed as religious zeal becomes apparent when we find that he repeats it almost identically some sixteen years later in the *Histoire de Jenni* (1775). Such duplicity also appears in the passage that repeats the figure of the *Sermon du Rabbin Akib*; Voltaire in the words of the black slave declares that 'nous sommes tous enfants d'Adam, blancs et noirs', a message whose full satirical impact is revealed by the further stipulation that this is the 'Sunday' teaching of the men of the Church. Stressing the arbitrary distinction given by Christians between their chosen holy day and the rest of the week, Voltaire underlines the dishonesty of the Christian message, one that, while affirming the rights of others, in fact deprives them of all such rights.²⁶⁵

Just as Voltaire seeks to undermine the identity of the ancient patriarchs by

²⁶³ *Essai sur les mœurs*, II, 357; I, 387.

²⁶⁴ D10090.

²⁶⁵ *Candide*, p.196.

emphasizing the uncertainty of their names, 'Mosé ou Moïse', 'Adonis ou Adonai', and the early Christians as 'Nazarenes' or 'Galileans', in his *contes* and other ludic works he makes use of a similar device. The intended innuendos behind the fictional names draw attention to the instability of our understanding of all identity. At times these nominal terms give an indication of the true nature of the protagonists (the nonsensical verbalist, Pangloss, the cruel, hard Vandendur and the ingenuous hero himself), but at others they point to an ambiguity, an ironic reversal of our expectations (the 'pure' or possibly 'saintly' Cunégonde). But even the lack of a name may serve as a marker of identity; the brutalized old woman represents the loss of beauty, the *castrato* the loss of manhood, the mutilated black slave the loss of freedom, and the arrogant unreasoning young baron the loss of authority.²⁶⁶

In his text Voltaire plays with figures of misperception, misplaced identity, and non-recognition. The Oreillons mistake Candide for a friar, and the monarchs see him as a man of importance. As for the hero himself, he misunderstands the relationship between the monkeys and the young women, unadvisedly trusts the dishonest Dutch merchant, and fails to perceive the multiple deceptions perpetrated against him in Paris. So too, on various occasions he fails to recognize Pangloss, Paquette, Frère Giroflée, and the baron. In this way identity is revealed as fluid and unreliable, a dual construct by the subject who observes it and by the subject who owns it, a situation comically revealed at the start of the tale with the representation of the supposedly important old baron and baroness finding their identity solely in the compliments of their fawning admirers. As for the Christians, they invest their personal identity with a mistaken authority by emphasizing their difference from others, *bulgares* from *abares*, Catholics from Protestants, Christians from Muslims or Jews, the 'civilized' from the 'savage'. While the young baron remains always incapable of standing back from this polarized viewpoint, Candide having escaped the restrictive world of the castle in Westphalia gradually becomes able to stand outside the conditioning of his *episteme*. During his travels, particularly as the outsider in South America, he is encouraged to question his own thinking further, to develop his self-understanding. These literary figures, while undermining the Europeans' identity, calling into question the Christians' political and moral superiority, their self-claimed right to positions of authority, enforce Voltaire's

²⁶⁶ Reference to Saint Cunégonde appears in *Il faut prendre un parti* (1772), p.548.

message: the need for self-examination, for a rejection of prejudice, and for tolerance.

* * *

La Pucelle

Voltaire portrays mankind's moral sense as a quality that inevitably develops in the individual when he or she is not manipulated by those who abuse their own reasoning. Like Locke, he denies the existence of innate ideas, but, diverging from his predecessor, he believes humanity to be born with a natural tendency towards an understanding of the just and the unjust. In *La Pucelle* Voltaire depicts Jeanne d'Arc, like Candide, as having a comprehension of the universal interpretation of justice, while those who are supposedly more enlightened perpetrate acts of extreme savagery and immorality. The almoner, the confessor and the archbishop ignore or dismiss the dictates of their religion to satisfy their passionate, selfish ambitions, and thus, by their denial of the truly moral, represent the negative side of education and the abuse of reason. In this way, Voltaire again represents the unfoundedness of the Christian's alleged superiority, a claim built on the unstable base of their presumed understanding of what is right or wrong.

In this text Voltaire plays with the motif of markers, and he mocks the significance attributed to them. Therefore he portrays Charles VII bowing down in reverence when he sees the *fleur-de-lys* that Jeanne has drawn on the buttocks of Monrose, his rival for the affections of his mistress, Agnès. But as Tsien illustrates, Voltaire creates an even more negative figure of the Christian idea of selfhood that emphasizes the instability of this construct. She points to the influence on Voltaire of Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*, 'in particular the scenes in which the title character goes on a killing rampage, losing his identity and becoming unrecognizable to others'. She adds that he then 'tears off his armour and clothes to run naked in the forest' where his skin becomes so tanned that 'he no longer resembles a Christian, which is one of the defining qualities of his identity'. Indeed, in *La Pucelle* Voltaire stresses these two themes; nakedness and loss or lack of identity. According to John Leigh, the former element, symbolic of the lewdness of the

poem, is a literalized metaphor for the naked truth that the writer wishes to expose. In the case of the second element, Tsien demonstrates how – as in *Le Marseillais et le lion* (1768) with its emphasis on the common feebleness of mankind without the trappings of authority – Voltaire relates the notion of identity to that of perceived status; the devious Hermaphrodix when ensnaring Jeanne and others in his castle, reduces them to a state of insanity so that ‘each character forgets the individual identification of the others and whether they are male or female, friend or foe, social equal or not’. Thus, in the words of Tsien, the ‘characters fail to recognize themselves’ and ‘fail to recognize those around them’ – the instability of the Christian identity becomes fully revealed.²⁶⁷

²⁶⁷ ‘Voltaire and the Temple of bad taste’, p.395, p.390, p.391.

Voltaire repeatedly directs his criticism of religion against its refusal of the universal, or its specious claim to universality for its particular beliefs. Any religion that makes such assertions, that affirms its exclusive chosenness, its unique possession of the holy word, denies the freedoms and rights of all others. By claiming for itself the absolute religious identity, it logically cancels or reduces other religious identities. In the deist's thinking, any individual religion's claim to universality fails on the grounds of its exclusivity. As Mervaud points out: 'Le théiste ne peut qu'être hostile à l'idée d'une révélation réservée à un peuple, à l'exclusion du reste de l'humanité.'²⁶⁸ Voltaire sets out the aims of the deist thinker, declaring: 'Il y a un Dieu, et il faut être juste. Voilà donc la religion universelle établie dans tous les temps et chez tous les hommes' (1765).²⁶⁹ And in the *Examen important de Milord Bolingbroke* he states:

La religion doit être claire, simple, universelle, à la portée de tous les esprits, parce qu'elle est faite pour tous les cœurs; sa morale ne doit point être étouffée sous le dogme, rien d'absurde ne doit la défigurer. (1766)²⁷⁰

Rejection of the absurd becomes part of Voltaire's condemnation of the reliance of religions on the fabulous. In *Le Taureau blanc* (1773) he emphasizes – through satirical parody – the confusion between possible truth and blatant falsehood, and shows how this confusion enters into story-telling. This text regales us with *contes* that are represented as *histoires*, thereby underlining the way fictional tales, generally purported to amuse, may falsely acquire the reputation of genuine accounts that bring about enlightenment. In this story Voltaire weaves together supposedly sacred narratives of different ages, peoples and places. He postulates that such fables or myths, through their deceptive or dishonest self-presentation as

²⁶⁸ *Le 'Dictionnaire philosophique' de Voltaire*, p.89. Pomeau investigates how Voltaire used the terms 'theist' and 'deist' (*La Religion de Voltaire*, p.428). But Besterman contends Voltaire made no distinction and, finding Pomeau's explanation of deism inadequate, proposes that since Voltaire's beliefs rested on such 'highly abstract philosophic notions' that he 'was at most an agnostic' – although Pomeau shows that this term did not exist in the eighteenth century (*Voltaire*, p.221, p.218, p.232).

²⁶⁹ 'Secte', p.520.

²⁷⁰ *Examen important*, p.284.

truths, undermine the natural religion. He indicates how it is only by rejecting such man-made fictions that we may discover what universal beliefs unite us. As he summarizes, when fable is stripped away: ‘Nous sommes tous de la même religion sans le savoir. Tous les peuples adorent un Dieu, des extrémités du Japon aux rochers du mont Atlas: ce sont des enfants qui crient à leur père en différents langages’ (1768).²⁷¹

* * *

The Jews and the question of exclusivity

Voltaire’s antipathy towards every religion that attests its universality to the exclusion of all others lies at the heart of his attack against Judaism. But Douglas questions the latter’s alleged exclusivity and points to the way ‘Leviticus teaches the congregation, “Love the stranger as thyself” (Lev.19.34)’.²⁷² Similarly, Kristeva shows how in Judaism the claim to universality does not rest on its exclusion of others, but rather on its openness to all who adopt its teachings: ‘sans cesse la Torah revient sur les devoirs des Juifs à l’égard des étrangers, et on note qu’aucun autre commandement [...] n’est répété aussi souvent.’ But the religion’s embracing of others goes further:

dans l’esprit du judaïsme, l’intégration totale de l’étranger dans la communauté juive fait pendant à l’idée de ‘peuple élu’: je suis un ‘élu’, mais le privilège de l’élection est cependant ‘ouvert à n’importe quel individu, à n’importe quel moment’ – d’où il résulte une ‘conception hybride de l’élection qui passe par l’hérédité *et* par le libre ralliement de toute conscience individuelle ou collective’.

(author’s italics)

Kristeva then adds:

Cependant, de son côté, le monothéisme biblique avait inclus l’étrangeté dans l’Alliance divine. Contrairement à l’image trop facilement reçue d’un ostracisme du peuple élu à

²⁷¹ *Sermon prêché à Bâle*, p.583.

²⁷² *Purity and Danger*, p.67.

l'encontre des autres, il avait inscrit depuis des millénaires, au fondement même de la royauté hébraïque, les étrangers capables d'accepter le contrat divin.²⁷³

But Voltaire, seeing this covenant as belonging solely to a particular religion, allows himself mockingly to reiterate many of the contemporary stereotypical fantasies so that he may deny Judaism's universality and diminish the Jews' alleged status of chosenness. Mercilessly deriding their claim to possession of the one and only religion, he repeats the age-old anti-Jewish figure of proud presumptuousness. In the *Histoire de l'établissement du christianisme* he sarcastically makes reference to the alleged claims of the Jewish people, writing:

Mosé ou Moïse (si on en croit les livres qui courent sous son nom) veut que le maître de l'univers ne soit que le Dieu du petit peuple juif, qu'il ne protège que cette poignée de scélérats obscurs, qu'il ait en horreur le reste du monde. (1777)²⁷⁴

He further denies the rationality of such claims by (on this occasion) depicting the Jews as related to the Arabs whom he has at times similarly denigrated. He asks 'Comment a-t-on osé supposer que Dieu choisit une horde d'Arabes voleurs pour être son peuple chéri et pour armer cette horde contre toutes les autres nations?' (1766).²⁷⁵

But in *La Philosophie de l'histoire* Voltaire invests this state of chosenness with a quality that is detrimental to the Jews themselves.

Mais il faut toujours se souvenir que non seulement les Juifs étaient le peuple chéri de Dieu, mais l'instrument de ses vengeances. C'était par lui qu'il punissait les péchés des autres nations, comme il punissait son peuple par elles. (1765)²⁷⁶

He makes chosenness a causality, an instrument of God's punishment of man, a factor which in turn he connects to the Jews' universally persecuted state. He understands the price paid by the Jews for being God's chosen people, the link

²⁷³ *Étrangers à nous-mêmes*, p.98, pp.101-02, p.93.

²⁷⁴ *Histoire de l'établissement du christianisme*, p.112.

²⁷⁵ *Examen important*, p.183.

²⁷⁶ *La Philosophie de l'histoire*, pp.243-44.

between their chosenness and their continuous suffering: 'Par ma foi, la nation chérie est une nation bien malheureuse' (1771).²⁷⁷ As expressed by Blanchot, for the Jewish people 'l'élection n'est pas un privilège'.²⁷⁸

So while, for Voltaire, the Jewish claim to chosenness may belong in the realm of myth and may be the cause of suffering to the Jews as a particular group, by its denial of the universal, the reality that it presents is more problematic to all mankind. He creates his argument against the Jewish claim of chosenness by attacking the sanctity, veracity and morality of their biblical texts; by denying the truth or justice of these, he endeavours to destroy any justification on the part of the Jews to such a claim. Voltaire's agenda belongs to that of the Enlightenment, whereby, according to Jean Starobinski, 'ce qui était le *sacré*, au début du XVIII^e siècle – révélation écrite, tradition, dogme –, a été livré à la critique "démystifiante" qui l'a réduit à n'être qu'œuvre humaine, imagination fabuleuse'.²⁷⁹ He therefore opens the *Sermon des cinquante* with the prayer: 'si l'on peut déshonorer la Divinité par des fables absurdes, périssent ces fables à jamais'.²⁸⁰ This comment permits him to deny that that is exactly what he is doing through his demolition of the scriptures – an interesting instance of what Francesco Orlando calls 'reversal of the subject', one of the forms of denial that Orlando finds constitutes much Enlightenment rhetoric, here compounded with another form of denial, 'extraneity' or distanciation. Orlando expressly uses the Freudian concept of denial (or 'denegation') while proposing that the compromise formation, in Enlightenment critique, is not sexual but political in character, and does not arise from a return of the repressed but from the need to mask a scandalous aggression. His detailed analysis of these compromise formations in which the political makes use of primary processes, and which usually function in the sexual domain, reminds us of the proximity of the two dimensions, at least in the writing of Voltaire.²⁸¹

Voltaire questions Judaism's claim that God's truth might be handed down in the written word. This he does first by his reference to the obvious mistakes that

²⁷⁷ 'Juifs', p.535.

²⁷⁸ 'Paix, paix au lointain et au proche', p.5.

²⁷⁹ 'Fable et mythologie aux XVII^e et XVIII^e siècles', in *Le Remède dans le mal*, p.260.

²⁸⁰ *Sermon des cinquante*, p.438.

²⁸¹ See 'Rhétorique des Lumières'.

the texts contain – satirically attributing these to the copyists, who alone are allowed to make errors – and second by his comparison of the Jews with the black peoples, who have no written language. This comparison, even while implying that both groups lack reason and civilization, creates a further reversal in that the latter appears to belong to a more honest, non-manipulative society, similar to that which Candide discovers in Eldorado.

The first prong of Voltaire's attack is against the fabulous element that he finds in the biblical texts, and he again makes use of ridicule to carry out his indictment. Repeatedly, while stressing the chronological, geographical, physical impossibilities that he finds evident in the Old Testament, he mockingly feigns credence of the accounts, and acceptance of their teachings; he pretends to renounce the right of humans to question the word of God. His satirical affectation of obedience to the dictates of the religious authorities, his adherence to an unquestioning acceptance of the biblical 'oracles', because 'il ne nous est pas permis d'en douter' (1756), enable him to introduce one of his major indictments against religion; the stifling of ordinary reason.²⁸² While in *La Bible enfin expliquée*, he contends that 'ce n'est pas avec les yeux de la raison qu'il faut lire ce livre, mais avec ceux de la foi' (1776), in the *Examen important de Milord Bolingbroke* he remarks that a man 'qui reçoit sa religion sans examen ne diffère pas d'un bœuf qu'on attelle' (1766).²⁸³ But even though Voltaire derides the fantastical element that he finds in the biblical texts, he also repeatedly makes use of it. To suit his purpose, frequently he relates these 'fables' in a factual mode. At such times, he bases his exegesis on a literal reading that purposely ignores these texts' quality of figure, of which Katz writes that the 'mythical images, metaphorical expressions, and anthropomorphic descriptions' are 'attempts to express the divine essence'.²⁸⁴ It is here that Sutcliffe identifies the focus of Voltaire's anxieties, the elements of mythic thinking that the author 'wished to but could not expunge from the application of reason'. But Voltaire's representation is part of his rhetorical programme; by selective use of such manipulative interpretation, he can condemn the texts not just for their 'absurdity', but also for their 'barbarity' – two qualities he frequently binds

²⁸² 'Juifs', p.512.

²⁸³ *La Bible enfin expliquée*, p.17, note 1; *Examen important*, p.169.

²⁸⁴ *From Prejudice to Destruction*, p.15.

together.²⁸⁵

Here we touch on the second prong of his attack, directed at the brutality found in the Bible. Even while dismissing the ancient accounts as fiction, he condemns the instances of savagery and fanaticism that they report. He allows those same biblical ‘facts’ that he has dismissed as ‘fictions’ to be used as grounds for his condemnation, and denounces the prophecies, events and customs that these ‘fables’ relate, censuring, by the same token, those who continue to honour these scriptures. Thus he manipulates his presentation of the texts according to his particular agenda of the moment. In a letter to Damilaville he acknowledges his use of such manipulation in order to reveal the ‘falsity’ of the biblical texts and to *écraser l’infâme*:

Je crois que la meilleure manière de tomber sur l’infâme, est de paraître n’avoir nulle envie de l’attaquer; [...] de faire voir combien on nous a trompé en tout; de montrer combien ce qu’on croit ancien est moderne; combien ce qu’on nous a donné pour respectable est ridicule; de laisser le lecteur tirer lui-même les conséquences. (9 July 1764)²⁸⁶

In a similar vein, to d’Argence he writes: ‘jamais la dispute n’a convaincu personne; on peut ramener les hommes en les faisant penser par eux-mêmes, en paraissant douter avec eux, en les conduisant comme par la main, sans qu’ils s’en aperçoivent’ (14 March 1764).²⁸⁷

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Sermon des cinquante

In the *Sermon des cinquante* Voltaire links the figure of the Jews’ belief in their chosenness to that of their supposed desire for eventual world mastery – again he gives evidence of his adherence to the contemporary stereotypical thinking. But with obvious irony that refers to their repeated enslavement, which he insists is the very contradiction of their alleged assertion, Voltaire writes:

²⁸⁵ ‘Myth, Origins, Identity’, p.116.

²⁸⁶ D11978.

²⁸⁷ D11769.

Laissons là cette nation atroce dans sa captivité de Babylone, et dans son esclavage sous les Romains, avec toutes les belles promesses de leur dieu Adonis ou Adonaï, qui avait si souvent assuré aux Juifs la domination de toute la terre.

Feigning a desire to distance himself from ‘tous ces miracles faits pour donner au peuple juif un malheureux coin de mauvaise terre, [...] au lieu de leur donner la fertile terre d’Égypte où ils étaient’, he mockingly scorns the Jews’ claim to their special status: ‘Si ce Dieu leur avait voulu donner une bonne terre, il pouvait leur donner l’Égypte; mais non: il les conduit dans un désert.’²⁸⁸

Voltaire repeats his accusation that the Jews claim that their holy word ‘ne permet pas d’en douter’, but then contends that the evidence of their ‘ghastly’ history makes it impossible for the ‘virtuous and wise’ to believe in the Scriptures; he bitterly indicts the way that, in his mind, Judaism contradicts the universal morality. He considers that whereas religion, the ‘secret voice’ of God, should unite and not divide mankind, Jewish history has been one of discord and division. But the proof of the falsity of their particular claim lies, he says, in the Jews’ refusal, as he construes it, of a genuinely universal religion open to all mankind: ‘donc toute religion qui n’appartient qu’à un peuple est fausse.’ Throughout the *Sermon des cinquante*, he adds constantly to the figure of falsity and dismantles the Jewish claims by presenting opposing logical arguments which serve to refute the supposed veracity of the texts. The ‘falsity’ of the claim of Moses’ authorship is exposed, he says, by anachronism; the illogicality of the Creation by the contradictory sequence of events; the fictitiousness of the geographical descriptions by the mistaken facts of the locations. He brings the divinely inspired word down to the level of mundane impossibilities and he declares that when the sun stopped at Gabaon and the moon at Aialon, ‘la nature suspend ses lois éternelles’. He savagely mocks the Jewish faith, deriding the fabulous nature of its stories; ridiculing Jewish doctrines of the ‘clean’ and the ‘unclean’, he questions the feasibility of Noah’s Ark in which ‘doivent entrer sept paires de tous les animaux mondes, et deux des immondes’. He queries how these creatures might have been sustained, and then, questioning the source of all the flood waters, he contemptuously dismisses the notion of divine intervention – God’s creation of

²⁸⁸ *Sermon des cinquante*, p.441, p.444.

cataracts in the sky – and concludes that ‘ceux qui écrivaient cela n’étaient pas, comme vous voyez, grands physiciens’. And, in order to reinforce his message regarding the impossibility of these accounts, Voltaire makes use of his most destructive mockery in the literal repetition of certain events; he reports how the Jews were spared from their neighbours’ wrath when ‘l’ânesse parle très raisonnablement et assez longtemps au prophète’, and how Eve was expelled from paradise as a result of the tempting words of the serpent who ‘parlait alors comme l’homme’.²⁸⁹

* * *

La Pucelle

Voltaire’s reduction of the Jewish holy word to the level of the ludicrous becomes most emphasized in *La Pucelle*. He mocks the biblical texts by commenting that in recounting his story he has ‘copied’ the facts, not invented them (1750-62) – a pointed reference to what he sees as the unreliable inaccuracies of the sacred writings. He also underlines the need to read texts with caution; satirically pointing to the poem’s intentional misreporting of the facts concerning Jeanne d’Arc’s parentage, he comments that ‘c’est une fiction poétique qui n’est peut-être pas permise dans un sujet grave’ (1730-62). He asks us again to question our ideas of what is untrue and what is true, what is for amusement and what is for spiritual enlightenment or moral instruction. And when referring to the Bible, he foregrounds through antiphrasal comments or footnotes what he finds to be the scriptures’ contradictions or absurd elements, contriving thereby to demolish the stories by means of his unrelenting and undisguised humour. To add to his sarcasm, he describes fifteenth-century military deeds and battles in terms taken from the Bible, giving particular emphasis to the Jews’ dependence on arms such as ‘lance, clou, dague, épieu, caillou, mâchoire’ (1730-62). As in the *Sermon des cinquante*, he mocks the biblical account of the donkey of Balaam, in this case introducing into his story a comparable figure in order to reveal the so-called ‘foolishness’ of the Jewish faith and the ‘mistakenness’ of its claim to chosenness. He makes certain that his reader sees the connection between his fiction and the

²⁸⁹ *Sermon des cinquante*, p.446, p.444, p.438, pp.445-46.

Jews' 'false' assertion. Jeanne's donkey, 'speaking well' says: 'J'avais parlé deux fois à Balaam, / Voyez en moi l'âne de Canaan' (1755-62).²⁹⁰

Jennifer Tsien shows that this figure of the ass 'with its traditional attributes of stupidity and general lasciviousness' not only 'reverses the "natural order"', but also 'demonstrates the degradation of the world'. As she points out, 'such figures help Voltaire to convince readers of the fundamental vulgarity and barbarism of the Old Testament'. They show his 'contempt for the animal legends of the Bible and his concern that they could be taken literally by the uneducated, or the *vulgaire*'.²⁹¹ However, while Voltaire here parodies the biblical story, we find that he demonstrates a non-awareness of what Douglas contends is the parodical nature of that original story itself. For her the Balaam episode is a political lampoon against someone in authority with a big stick', a satire where the donkey possibly represents 'the patient people of Israel'.²⁹² But in his later text the *Traité sur la tolérance* Voltaire gives a more balanced, if still slightly mocking, portrayal of the figure of the donkey, showing the commonly understood interpretation to be the result of other people's misconception. He writes:

dans le temple de Salomon [...] des chérubins sont posés dans l'arche, ils ont une tête d'aigle et une tête de veau; et c'est apparemment cette tête de veau mal faite, trouvée dans le temple par des soldats romains, qui fit croire longtemps que les Juifs adoraient un âne. (1763)²⁹³

At the same time in the figure of the donkey, as it appears in *La Pucelle*, Voltaire creates a further negative representation of how language may be intentionally misused. Jeanne is tempted to succumb to the advances of her donkey as a result of his flattering tone, just as in the Garden of Eden, 'le serpent séducteur / Quand il voulut subjuguier notre mère, / Lui fit d'abord un compliment flatteur' (1730-62) – a representation that emphasizes the way the flatterer counts on the foolishness of the person he dupes.²⁹⁴ Linguistic manipulation can serve to reinforce the position of social or religious systems and authorities through

²⁹⁰ *La Pucelle*, XV, 15, p.496; II, p.278 (note 2; de Voltaire); II, 230, p.287; XX, 179-80, p.565.

²⁹¹ 'Voltaire and the Temple of bad taste', p.378, p.384.

²⁹² *In the Wilderness*, p.225, p.221.

²⁹³ *Traité sur la tolérance*, p.199.

²⁹⁴ *La Pucelle*, XX, 169-71, p.564.

unintelligible words and false compliments, what the Quaker terms ‘cet indigne commerce de mensonges et de flatteries’ (1734).²⁹⁵ Voltaire’s point, therefore, implies that Judaic scripture has bequeathed illogical and incomprehensible (and yet supposedly indisputable) teachings to its followers, and ‘flattered’ them with the idea of their chosenness. Such actions forbid debate and instead command total credulity and obedience. Stating that Charles VII puts his trust in ‘whosoever’ can read, Voltaire indicts any such reliance on the written word. In *La Pucelle* he constantly weaves his figurative network, uniting images of the word, non-reason, religious fantasy, falsity, manipulation and misguided innocence. In this way, he reiterates his savage criticism of the Bible, representing it as a pernicious text that by devious practices has ‘deceived’ the unworldly and the uneducated.²⁹⁶

But, to take his attack further, Voltaire makes use of another comic rhetorical device; in the poem he personifies Stupidity, Ignorance, Pride, Imagination, Credulity and others. These figures serve to confuse the protagonists of the poem, so that on arrival at Hermaphrodix’s castle Jeanne and her knight, Dunois, believe themselves (like *Candide* in Westphalia) to be in the earthly paradise (1730-62). Thus Voltaire through a farcically parodic manipulation represents the Genesis story, the foundation on which the Bible is based, as one of foolish fable, credible only to the gullible. Promoting the Enlightenment agenda, the demolition of the dependence on mythic origins, he emphasizes how blind and unreasoning faith plays on imagination which ‘abjure le bon sens’, and ambiguity which incorporates:

La louche énigme et les mauvais bons mots

A double sens, qui font l’esprit des sots.

Les préjugés, les méprises, les songes,

Les Contresens, les absurdes mensonges.

(1730-62)²⁹⁷

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²⁹⁵ *Lettres philosophiques*, I, 6.

²⁹⁶ See Jean Starobinski ‘Sur la flatterie’, in *Le Remède dans le mal*.

²⁹⁷ *La Pucelle*, IV, 244, p.328; XVII, 43, 60-63, pp.520-21.

‘Juifs’

In ‘Juifs’ Voltaire presents the discord of the ancient Jews as a contradiction to the true meaning of religion. He describes the separation, as related in the Old Testament, of the Jewish ‘realm’ into two ‘little provinces’, Judah and Israel, each with different customs and beliefs: ‘chaque faction ayant donc ses rois, son dieu, son culte, et ses prophètes, elles se firent une guerre cruelle’ (1756).²⁹⁸ But Cotoni draws our attention to the way that in the *Traité sur la tolérance* (1763) ‘il ne dit rien du schisme, ni de la haine qui s’éleva entre Juda et Israël’. This omission in the later text again gives us evidence of how Voltaire manipulates his interpretation of the Bible, cutting and pasting his references at will. As Cotoni and others point out, a figure of Jewish intolerance and disputatiousness would not serve his purpose in the *Traité*; in this case (where the writing is more controlled), he needs an example of positive Jewish behaviour in order to give force to his message of universal tolerance.²⁹⁹

In ‘Juifs’ Voltaire repeats the figure of the Jews’ supposed ambitious desire for world domination. He uses this popular fantasy to reiterate his allegation regarding the Jewish ‘oracles’:

Presque tous les peuples qui ont écrit l’histoire de leur origine ont voulu la relever par des prodiges: tout est miracle chez eux. [...] Ce qui distingue les Juifs des autres nations, c’est que leurs oracles sont les seuls véritables: il ne nous est pas permis d’en douter. Ces oracles, qu’ils n’entendent que dans le sens littéral, leur ont prédit cent fois qu’ils seraient les maîtres du monde; [...] Ils doivent donc croire, et ils croient en effet, qu’un jour leurs prédictions s’accompliront, et qu’ils auront l’empire de la terre. (1756)³⁰⁰

While in this instance Voltaire diminishes his criticism of perceived Jewish aspirations by incorporating them into the universal foolishness of mankind, he then derides their particularity, contending that the Jews are still ‘today’ ‘en horreur aux hommes, assurant que le ciel et la terre, et tous les hommes, ont été créés pour eux seuls’ (1756). He proceeds to demolish this notion of world mastery by repeating his Jewish figures of impoverishment, forced wandering and

²⁹⁸ ‘Juifs’, p.515.

²⁹⁹ ‘Ambivalences et ambiguïtés dans le “*Traité*”’, p.187.

³⁰⁰ ‘Juifs’, p.512.

non-belonging, which he suggests expose the illogicality of their argument. The Jews have founded their mistaken belief in chosenness on the evidence of their holy books, despite the non-fulfilment of the prophecies and predictions that these contain: 'ils n'ont jamais possédé qu'un petit coin de terre pendant quelques années; ils n'ont pas aujourd'hui un village en propre' (1756). In his later highly sarcastic 'Réponse à quelques objections', Voltaire drives home his satirical attack on the Jewish faith in God's promises. Entitling his sixth letter 'Sur la beauté de la terre promise', he immediately proceeds to reduce Jewish claims for their divinely given lands to the realm of the everyday and the pointedly banal, representing 'ce malheureux désert' as unequal to Provence. But he then takes the ridicule further, addressing the Jews with the comment that should they regain possession of Jerusalem and its surrounding lands from the Turks:

Il est vrai que vous n'auriez point de chevaux, parce qu'il n'y a que des ânes vers Hershalaïm, et qu'il n'y a jamais eu que des ânes. Vous manquerez souvent de froment, mais vous en tireriez d'Égypte ou de la Syrie. (1771)

Thus Voltaire invests the Jews' faith with an image of absurdity and falsity, represented by the figure of foolishness (the donkey) and by the figure of unworthiness, indicated by his implied reference to what he portrays as the Jews' 'thieving' past.³⁰¹

By connecting a theoretical future to the reported events of the Bible, Voltaire might here appear to be creating an enduring essence for the Jews, the single historical entity discovered by Katz. But I propose that, in Voltaire's view, such a permanent essence exists only in the minds of the Jews, who see themselves eternally as God's elect. For him, the 'problem' of fixing the Jewish identity rests in the absence of such an essence; it is not to be found in chosenness. To strengthen his argument, Voltaire brings the Jews' existence down to the level of the worldly or the commonplace, and emphasizes the elements of banality and victimhood that he discovers in their ancient scriptures. The highly satirical tone of the above passage confers an excessively mundane character on the persecuted

³⁰¹ 'Juifs', p.518, p.512, pp. 538-39. Here Voltaire's intention behind his spelling of Jerusalem appears to be to emphasize 'foreignness', and therefore it has not been standardized.

people of the sacred stories, and, rather than seeking to carry forward into the future continued attributes that point to the enduring nature of the biblical Children of God, his suggested reference to the ancient texts acts in a regressive way; he portrays the ancient Jews as having the everyday characteristics of a living (and deprived) people, a representation that undermines their divinely given status. He reinscribes the Jews of the Bible in terms of a basic if not immoral humanity. However, at the same time he mockingly and selectively creates a reverse movement by investing the future with an implication of the reported or alleged 'failings' of the biblical people. I would argue that the passage does not appear to have as its main purpose the creation of a permanent Jewish entity; it does not pretend to be historical or factual, but introduces a figure that is purely hypothetical. I propose that here Voltaire has a more serious intent; he wishes to present his contemporary Jews with a choice. Either they have to accept that they are related to a so-called 'wretched' people of the biblical past, or they have no special heritage; either their identity of chosenness is grounded in a common human banality or it is historically absent.

While he writes scornfully that the Jews resist questioning and refuse to admit to the presence of any doubt, by use of irony, he satirically charges the Bible with deception through his often repeated comment that the evident mistakes must be the responsibility of the copyists 'qui seuls ont pu se tromper' (1756). Voltaire asserts the 'falsity' of the biblical message by adopting the impersonal form and by feigning surprise: 'on dit' (1756), 'on a prétendu' (undated), 'ce qu'il y a de singulier' (undated), 'vos livres disent' (1771). Once more linking blind faith to imagination, he describes the Bible stories as a 'suite continue de prodiges qui étonnent l'imagination, et qui exercent la foi' (1756). He pretends that his 'historical' approach will allow these texts to be 'dépouillés du concours céleste et des miracles que Dieu daigna si longtemps opérer en faveur de ce peuple' (1756).³⁰² This passage clearly throws into relief the issues that he wishes to criticize – the confusion of an *histoire* of fact and the mere relation of fiction, the claimed chosenness of the Jewish people, the explanation of the incredible by the insistence on faith. He scorns man's dependence on supposed authority and antiquity, a mode of proof that he reveals as worthless by the figurative network he

³⁰² 'Juifs', p.515, p.520, p.523, p.524, p.529, p.512.

creates between the written word and those peoples commonly assumed in his day to be uncivilized: 'Il se peut que les nègres d'Angola et ceux de Guinée soient beaucoup plus anciens que vous, [...] mais les nègres ne nous ont pas encore communiqué leurs livres' (1771). Voltaire sees it as an impossibility that the Jews, a wandering and often enslaved 'horde', who 'ne furent jamais ni physiciens, ni géomètres, ni astronomes' (1756), could have taught their beliefs and ways to the rest of the world: Les grands peuples ne peuvent tirer leurs lois et leur connaissances d'un petit peuple obscur et esclave' (1756).³⁰³

* * *

Candide

In *Candide* Voltaire again parodies the Old Testament texts, drawing his depictions of battle scenes from those described in the Bible. Here too the images are deeply critical, and the humour that is ever evident in the *conte* appears with satirical force to depict the absurd and unreasoning behaviour of mankind. Deriding all religious and philosophical systems that base their authority on unintelligible teachings, he sarcastically portrays Candide listening 'in good faith' to Pangloss. He repeats his indictment against faith itself which is shown to be founded on unreason and a blind, even apathetic, acceptance of a teaching that, far from good, may often be harmful. Pangloss, 'the oracle' in the Baron's castle, becomes a metaphor for all dogmatic prescription and illogical thinking that denies all question, that refuses all right to doubt. By contrast, in the idealistic world of Eldorado we find the truly honest, non-manipulative society, one based on reason. Eschewing sectarianism and artificially based social systems and hierarchies, it follows the 'religion of the whole world', and, avoiding man-made dogma, it praises God while allowing others to worship him as they wish. Voltaire emphasizes the absence in Eldorado of priests and monks 'qui enseignent, qui disputent, qui gouvernent, qui cabalent'; he makes no mention of books or the recounting of fables. Instead, he describes his perfect society, one that concentrates on the factual sciences, mathematics and physics, those same sciences that he repeatedly contends were absent from the world of the ancient

³⁰³ 'Juifs', p.531, p.521.

Jews. The representation Voltaire creates around the figure of Eldorado may be viewed as the polarized opposite of all that he finds manifest in Judaism – universality as opposed to particularity, reason as opposed to ‘foolish’ dogma, factual knowledge as opposed to faith founded on fable.³⁰⁴

* * *

Essai sur les mœurs and La Philosophie de l'histoire

In *La Philosophie de l'histoire* Voltaire exploits the Jews' state of wandering to throw into question the authority of the Jewish texts. He presents a practical reason for rejecting the antiquity and veracity of these ‘oracles’:

Les peuples errants doivent être les derniers qui aient écrit, parce qu'ils ont moins de moyens que les autres d'avoir des archives et de les conserver, parce qu'ils ont peu de besoin, peu de lois, peu d'événements, qu'ils ne sont occupés que d'une subsistance précaire, et qu'une tradition orale leur suffit. [...] ce n'est qu'au bout de plusieurs siècles qu'une histoire un peu détaillée peut succéder à ces registres informes, et cette première histoire est toujours mêlée d'un faux merveilleux, par lequel on veut remplacer la vérité qui manque.

Voltaire reinforces this demolition through his device of linking the Jewish people to other allegedly ‘primitive’ populations; Samoyeds, Nazamons and Eskimos. He asks whether, if these other groups tried to present similarly incredible ancient stories as true, ‘ne se moquerait-on pas de ces pauvres sauvages’ (1765).³⁰⁵ And going further, in the *Essai sur les mœurs* he contends that the Jews have manipulated the truth and ‘enveloped’ it with ‘ridiculous fables’ (1756).³⁰⁶ He therefore concludes: ‘La superstition a toujours une mauvaise logique’ (1765).³⁰⁷

Adding to his figure of the falsity of Jewish claims, he emphasizes the failure of the prophets' promises. As the biblical Jews, ‘comptant toujours sur leur délivrance, sur les promesses de leurs prophètes, sur le secours de leur Dieu’, remained ‘abandoned by Providence’, and as the Jews who were Voltaire's

³⁰⁴ *Candide*, p.189.

³⁰⁵ *La Philosophie de l'histoire*, pp.269-70.

³⁰⁶ *Essai sur les mœurs*, II, 160.

³⁰⁷ *La Philosophie de l'histoire*, p.208.

contemporaries continued to live in a state of deprivation and even persecution, he reasserts that the claims of the prophets were false; Jewish prophecies have never come true and the veracity of all the Jews' pretensions are thus undermined. God did not give 'la fertile Égypte à son peuple chéri', and the state of their 'wretched' lands in Judah proves that God's covenant has never been fulfilled. To further his demolition of all Jewish claims, Voltaire intentionally uses repetition, constantly reiterating sarcastically that God 'deigned' to serve his chosen people – by his multiplication of their number 'contre l'ordre de la nature', by his decision to become 'le roi du peuple juif', and by his enactment of such 'nouveaux prodiges' as the Fall of Jericho (1765).³⁰⁸

Can we arrive at a general conclusion concerning this plethora of rhetorical devices? Brumfitt contends that *La Philosophie de l'histoire*, by asserting that whosoever 'claims divine authority for his laws is [...] both un "traître" and "un blasphémateur"', contains 'a final condemnation of Judaism and Christianity'. Indeed the tone is highly critical when addressing the Jews' religion, but I find that at times in this text Voltaire softens his condemnation of the Jewish people.³⁰⁹ As in 'Juifs', he represents their pretensions as a widespread misconception, common to many others, and contends that 'il n'y eut presque point de peuple qui ne conservât dans ses archives, ou qui n'eût par la tradition orale, quelque prédiction qui l'assurait de la conquête du monde' (1765).³¹⁰ Tony Myers, in his study of Žižek, writes: 'The racist, confronted with the abyss of the Jew's desire, makes sense of it by constructing a fantasy in which the Jew is at the centre of some nefarious plot, such as to take over the world.' But, even while repeating the common stereotype, Voltaire reveals the claim of world domination to be one common to most people, and therefore not a valid excuse for ostracism or persecution of any individual group. According to him, in this instance the Jews are like most other people.³¹¹

He shows the way ignorance has given rise to such false pretensions that in turn have led to suffering. He demonstrates how the Jewish people's belief that God had the right to 'punir les pechés des Cananéens par les mains des Juifs' was

³⁰⁸ *La Philosophie de l'histoire*, p.232, p.222, p.225, p.227.

³⁰⁹ Introduction to *La Philosophie de l'histoire*, p.320.

³¹⁰ *La Philosophie de l'histoire*, p.194.

³¹¹ *Slavoj Žižek*, p.98.

a prime reason for their persecution by others.

Il n'est pas bien étonnant que les peuples voisins se réunissent contre les Juifs, qui ne pouvaient passer que pour des brigands exécrables dans l'esprit des peuples aveuglés, et non pour les instruments sacrés de la vengeance divine et du futur salut du genre humain. (1765)

However, here, by a further ironic mocking reversal that calls on the reader to effect the displacement, Voltaire creates an image of foolish and ignorant blindness, not in those who could not see the 'true' nature of God's chosen people, but in the Jews who failed, and allegedly continue to fail, to perceive themselves as others must have seen them, that is as mere savage 'brigands'. This suggested element of failure links with Voltaire's representation of Jewish responsibility and his demand for their engagement in an honest self-criticism.³¹²

* * *

The Christian Word

Manifestly, in the claim to the one true word, salvation through Christ's mediation being the only path, Christianity breaches the universal in exactly the same way as does Judaism. As we have seen, for Voltaire such mistaken thinking is common to humanity, and he states that 'dans toutes les religions de l'Orient, le peuple est appelé le peuple de Dieu' (1769).³¹³ The Jewish people are not alone in considering themselves uniquely privileged by God, and in the case of the Jews and the Christians their identical claims express their most extreme desire to mark a difference from the other. In 'Sur les Pensées de M. Pascal', Voltaire declares that the Jansenist promises 'the empire of the world' to those who follow his beliefs, and he questions the logic of any 'system' that contends that 'Dieu n'est venu que pour si peu de personnes' (1734).³¹⁴ In a similarly critical mode, he writes that at the time of the Roman Empire, 'il est incontestable que les chrétiens

³¹² *La Philosophie de l'histoire*, p.228, p.229.

³¹³ *Essai sur les mœurs*, I, 200.

³¹⁴ *Lettres philosophiques*, II, 191.

voulaient que leur religion fût la dominante' (1764), and later he contends that when Europeans arrived in China, Tonkin and Japan they declared: 'nous sommes sur la terre les seuls qui aient raison, et que nous devons être partout les maîtres' (1772).³¹⁵

In his depiction of the two groups, Jews and Christians, Voltaire uses identical language in order to strengthen the comparison; in the *Sermon des cinquante* he charges the writers of the Old and New Testaments with having tricked the people, and in the *Homélie prononcées à Londres*, by innuendo, he accuses the copyists of the Gospels of having 'changed the texts' (1767) – a criticism that does not rest on an ironic suggestion of mistake, but clearly indicates the presence of definite devious intention. But, for Voltaire, deceitful manipulation on the part of the Christians becomes most manifest in the workings of the First Council of Nicaea (325). This council was called by the Emperor Constantine to settle the bitter controversy that occupied Christian minds regarding the nature of Christ's divinity.³¹⁶ Whereas, according to Karen Armstrong for example, this was 'no arid debate but concerned the nature of the Christian experience', a deliberation where the participants 'were struggling to articulate this experience in conceptual symbols to explain it to themselves and to others', Voltaire finds the dictates that proceeded from the council to be the basis of all subsequent Christian dispute. He throws doubt on the arbitrary nature of the decisions appertaining to future Christian doctrine, and questions the charge of heresy laid against those who held beliefs that were previously considered to be acceptable.³¹⁷ Querying the right of authorities to persecute those who continue to revere earlier creeds, he asks whether 'la cruauté, l'injustice, seraient-elles moins grandes, de punir aujourd'hui celui qui penserait comme on pensait autrefois?' (1763).³¹⁸

Armstrong, while agreeing that dispute among Christians developed from the proceedings of the council, contends that much of this came about as a result of the confusion between Western and Eastern thought. She points to the Roman Church's failure to distinguish the difference, as marked out by Basil, Bishop of Caesarea, between *kerygma* and *dogma*. She explains:

³¹⁵ 'Tolérance', VF, p.553, M.xx, p.525 (originally in the *Questions sur l'Encyclopédie*).

³¹⁶ *Homélie prononcées à Londres*, p.479.

³¹⁷ *A History of God*, p.132.

³¹⁸ *Traité sur la tolérance*, p.189.

Both kinds of Christian teaching were essential to religion. *Kerygma* was the public teaching of the Church, based on the scriptures. *Dogma*, however, represented the deeper meaning of biblical truth, which could only be apprehended through religious experience and expressed in symbolic form.

So, just as Basil had warned, much of Christian teaching ‘lay beyond words, concepts and human powers of analysis’. Armstrong then summarizes the problems this presented to the Enlightenment thinkers:

Thus the Trinity must not be interpreted in a literal manner; it was not an abstruse ‘theory’ but the result of *theoria*, contemplation. When Christians in the West became embarrassed by this dogma during the eighteenth century and tried to jettison it, they were trying to make God rational and comprehensible to the Age of Reason.

Voltaire indeed sees dogma as a contradiction to that reason, but his argument goes further, representing it more as ‘the public teaching of the Church’, and less as that ‘deeper meaning of biblical truth [...] expressed in *symbolic* form’ (my emphasis).³¹⁹

Rodney Bomford, borrowing from the thinking of Freud, links man’s understanding of God with the workings of the Unconscious. He writes:

The attributes of God are evidently close cousins, at the very least, of the characteristics of the Unconscious. What the mystic leaves behind the cloud of unknowing, the philosopher attempts to deal with by reasoned argument. If the philosopher’s God is the same as the God of the mystics, or in any way like him, then the philosopher will have to speak of his or her God in the modalities imposed on language by the Unconscious.

Following his reading of Matte Blanco, Bomford relates religious understanding to the primary application of symmetry as found in the Unconscious, ‘the registration of sameness and the ignoring of difference’, and he therefore proposes that ‘many of the historic controversies of Christianity may be resolved by

³¹⁹ *A History of God*, pp.133-34, p.138.

accepting the necessity of expressing them through paradox and myth, by recognising the symmetric logic implicit in all talk of God'. He adds that 'a people who have lost touch with their myths will be exposed to the loss of the centre, for they will have no language to connect it with the rest of life'.³²⁰ Žizek proceeds with this argument, writing:

philosophy needs the recourse to myth, not only for external reasons, in order to explain its conceptual teaching to the uneducated masses, but inherently, to 'suture' its own conceptual edifice where it fails in reaching its innermost core, from Plato's myth of the cave to Freud's myth of the primordial father and Lacan's myth of *lamella*. Myth is thus the Real of *logos*: the foreign intruder, impossible to get rid of, impossible to remain fully within it.³²¹

This takes us to the root of the problem as seen by Voltaire. For him, all religions (except that 'natural religion' which he seeks to promote) have been created in myth, and by myth he means fable, a story or fantasy that instead of uniting a community or giving it meaning, misleads the people. Such myths, whether held by Jews, Christians or others, may deny the universal and lead to the breakdown of a society.

For Kristeva, just as the Jews showed a way towards a universality through the possibility of an embracing of their faith by all, the Christians found a similar entrance into the universal through the *logos*, the Word made flesh in Christ. The *Ecclesia* of Saint Paul was 'une communauté autre: celle des différents, des étrangers transcendant les nationalités par la foi dans le Corps du Christ ressuscité'. Kristeva points to the message in Paul's letter to the Colossians :

Débarassez-vous des agissements de l'homme ancien que vous étiez, et revêtez l'homme nouveau, qui progresse vers la vraie connaissance en se renouvelant à l'image de son Créateur. Alors vous êtes dans un monde où il n'y a plus ni Grecs, ni Juifs, ni circoncis, ni incirconcis, ni Barbares, ni Scythes, ni esclaves, ni hommes libres, mais le Christ, qui est tout en tous.

In the thinking of the early Church: 'L'aliénation de l'étranger cesse dans

³²⁰ *The Symmetry of God*, pp.74-75, p.27, p.135, p.150.

³²¹ *On Belief*, p.11.

l'universalité de l'amour pour l'autre.' But Kristeva then shows the gradual degradation of Christian teaching, whereby over time 'l'étranger n'est pas exclu s'il est chrétien, mais le non-chrétien est un étranger dont l'hospitalité chrétienne n'a cure'. And the decline went further:

Mais dès son âge d'or, aux IV^e et V^e siècles, et tout en manifestant cette largeur d'esprit qui lui a conféré sa séduction et sa force initiales, le cosmopolitisme chrétien porte en son sein cet ostracisme qui exclut l'autre croyance et aboutira à l'Inquisition.

From this time Christians 'tout en se voulant universelles, n'acceptent en leur sein que ceux qui adoptent la *même* universalité' (author's italics).³²² The Church's so-called cosmopolitism becomes nothing more than, what Laclau terms, the 'universalization of its own particularism'.³²³ Voltaire, linking the Christians to the Jews through their common hatred for the other, suggests to Elie Bertrand that this characteristic has marked their past behaviour:

Ils n'ont regardé et traité comme frères que ceux qui étaient habillés de leur couleur.

Quiconque portait leur livrée était regardé comme un saint. Celui qui ne l'était pas était

saintement égorgé en ce monde et damné pour l'autre. (26 December 1763)³²⁴

But his criticism then emphasizes the particular lack of charity of Christ's followers: 'Ce christianisme vous ordonne l'hospitalité, et rien n'est moins hospitalier que vous' (1768).³²⁵

Mythos and *logos*, the modes of representation seen as indispensable in the pre-Enlightenment world, may be thought of as coming apart by the eighteenth century. Armstrong unites this era: 'the people of Europe and America had achieved such astonishing success in science and technology that they began to think that *logos* was the only means to truth and began to discount *mythos* as false and superstitious.'³²⁶ And yet, for Voltaire, the problem of Christianity also exists

³²² *Étrangers à nous-mêmes*, p.113, p. 121, p.124, p.127, p.128, p.101. The quotation comes from *Colossians* 3, 9-11.

³²³ *Emancipation(s)*, p.24.

³²⁴ D11580.

³²⁵ *Sermon prêché à Bâle*, p.587.

³²⁶ *The Battle for God*, p.xv.

within the holy word itself, the *logos* that, according to Christian doctrine, became incarnate in Christ. He declares that while in the time of Plato the *logos* was wisdom, 'la raison de l'Être suprême', for Christians it has become the Word and 'a second person of God' (1764). This takes his attack on to another, more serious, plane: for Voltaire it is no longer just the dogma, but the divine itself, that is man's creation. In *Le Taureau blanc* (1773) we find this notion of faith founded on a man-made divinity most obviously parodied; this story centres around the triple metamorphosis of Nebuchadnezzar, changed by human word from man to beast to god (a representation that Guénée condemns for its lack of biblical foundation). And, drawing on what he mockingly refers to as *l'histoire véritable* of the Old Testament, Voltaire creates another dual attack; against the illogical stories of ancient Judaism, but also against the newer and supposedly more rational beliefs of Christianity. He finds that the Christian word has been spread by means of its unintelligible nature, and that it has resisted reasoned opposition by its use of the incomprehensible. So in 'Religion', while attacking the inaccessible nature of the Christian doctrine – such as 'la consubstantialité du Père et du Verbe, et la procession du *pneuma*, organe divin du divin *logos*, deux natures et deux volontés résultantes de l'hypostase' – he condemns the Church's adoption of 'une métaphysique profonde et au-dessus de l'intelligence humaine' (1764).³²⁷ Through his repetition of the complex terms adopted by the Church, he emphasizes its failure to convey a meaningful doctrine, and by including himself among those who cannot understand, he exposes the universal non-comprehension of the Church's teachings. Still more seriously, he shows that the dispute as to whether or not Jesus is the Word has brought about a history of bloodshed. He writes:

S'il est Verbe est-il émané de Dieu dans le temps ou avant le temps? S'il est émané de Dieu est-il coéternel ou consubstantiel avec lui? Ou est-il d'une substance semblable? [...] On sophistiquait, on ergotait, on haïssait, on s'excommunait chez les chrétiens pour quelques-uns de ces dogmes inaccessibles à l'esprit humain. (1767)³²⁸

He summarizes that intolerance is 'le droit des tigres; et il est bien plus horrible,

³²⁷ 'Religion', p.478.

³²⁸ 'Arius', pp.369-70.

car les tigres ne déchirent que pour manger, et nous nous sommes exterminés pour des paragraphes' (1763).³²⁹ Attacking the obscure doctrines of the Church with his satirical comment that 'la religion chrétienne n'en demeurera pas moins vraie quand même on n'en tirerait pas ces conclusions ingénieuses, qui ne peuvent servir qu'à faire briller l'esprit' (1734), he shows how Christianity has moved away from its universal base, its openness to all people, and has become controlled and manipulated by an elite who re-enforce their position by presenting themselves as intellectually superior.³³⁰

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Sermon des cinquante

When addressing the Christians' claim to their unique faith, in the *Sermon des cinquante* Voltaire draws attention to the complexity of their beliefs: 'on fait de Jésus le logos, le Verbe-Dieu, puis consubstantiel à Dieu son père.'³³¹ But, as he again points out in the *Homélie prononcées à Londres*, such confusing thinking or such use of difficult terms, often becomes the cause of dispute and bloodshed: 'Enfin, depuis la consubstantialité jusqu'à la transsubstantiation, termes aussi difficiles à prononcer qu'à comprendre, tout a été sujet de disputes, et toute dispute a fait couler des torrents de sang' (1767).³³² In the *Sermon* he repeats his condemnation of the destructive potential of religious myths to society as a whole. Such beliefs, Voltaire contends, find their origins in man-made dogma alone, a dogma created by authorities to satisfy their own ends. He proposes that at first men did not dare to 'faire de cet homme un Dieu, mais bientôt on s'encourage', and Christ came to be regarded as God. Voltaire questions which 'metaphysic of Plato' mixed with the 'Nazarene sect' eventually brought about the Trinity, an article of faith that is abhorred by the Muslims as an act of idolatry. He demolishes its credibility by creating his own fable of falsity: 'On imagine la Trinité, et, pour la faire croire, on falsifie les premiers évangiles.' He represents the Christian word

³²⁹ *Traité sur la tolérance*, p.158.

³³⁰ *Lettres philosophiques*, II, 186.

³³¹ *Sermon des cinquante*, p.451.

³³² *Homélie prononcées à Londres*, p.454.

itself as an act of deception.³³³

Voltaire uses a similar figure to that adopted in his demolition of the Jewish texts; just as the Jews called their writings holy, the Christians' *histoire* of Christ 'est rapportée dans les livres qu'on nomme *Évangiles*'. As with the Old Testament, he points to the contradictions evident in the Gospels, but, adding further to the critical tone, suggests a deviousness in the eventual selection of these scriptures; of the original forty-nine, the Church authorities chose four, those whose message they considered most compatible.³³⁴ Seeking to create a separation between fact and fiction that he does not find exists in the early Christian texts, Voltaire claims that the writer Flavius Josephus makes no mention of Christ since he is 'un historien trop grave pour avoir fait mention d'un tel homme'. He continues:

En un mot, point d'artifices, de fraudes, d'impostures, que les nazaréens ne mettent en œuvre: et après cela on vient nous dire tranquillement que les apôtres prétendus n'ont pu être ni trompés ni trompeurs, et qu'il faut croire à des témoins qui se sont fait égorger pour soutenir leurs dépositions.

Demolishing the claims to Christ's divinity, Voltaire then suggests that the accusations that the Christians level at others are in fact true of themselves, and he asks satirically: 'N'en reconnaissez-vous pas vous-mêmes de supposés?'³³⁵

In this highly critical text the writing moves from a factual demolition of all biblical scriptures – both Jewish and Christian – to a vitriolic attack often couched in scatological terms. To diminish the status of the Christian word, the incarnation of Christ, Voltaire not only emphasizes his human nature, but reduces his status further by added figures of immoral heritage and mythical inaccuracy. He relates Christ's birth to the 'adulterous homicide' of David, and connects his conception to what he calls the incomprehensible predictions and disgusting actions of the prophets: Isaiah's fathering of *Maher Salal-has-bas*, whom the Christians 'ont détourné en faveur de leur Christ'; the much repeated and allegedly 'disgusting'

³³³ *Sermon des cinquante*, p.451.

³³⁴ *Sermon des cinquante*, p.449; the number of these Gospels varies in Voltaire's texts; fifty are mentioned in the *Philosophie de l'histoire*.

³³⁵ *Sermon des cinquante*, p.451, p.452.

meal of Ezekiel, interpreted as ‘un type, une figure de l’Église de Jésus-Christ’. Voltaire reinforces his mocking demolition by reference to the Gospels’ contradictory records of Christ’s forebears; having emphasized Jesus’ putative family line to Joseph he then adds the sarcastic comment that ‘les évangélistes assurent que Jésus n’est pas fils de Joseph’. Christ is thereby represented in two opposing ways: on one hand, the offspring of Mary alone with no connection to the House of David, on the other, the descendent of that honoured, but highly immoral, human line.³³⁶

As Brumfitt and M.I. Gerard Davis suggest, this text, written in the middle years of his life before the appearance of *Candide* and the author’s involvement in *causes célèbres*, marks the period of Voltaire’s most negative discourse regarding Jesus.

In his early works [...] Voltaire had shown himself markedly hostile to the person of Christ, and this hostility had, if anything, intensified with the years. [...] But already in the *Traité sur la tolérance* of 1763, a new note had been struck, and after 1767 it became the predominant one. Christ ceased to be an object of criticism and became one of the great teachers of mankind.³³⁷

Similarly Pomeau traces a movement towards a more favourable interpretation of Jesus on the part of Voltaire. He considers that after 1760, ‘le pour se mêle au contre’, a process that the critic attributes to Voltaire’s firm rejection of atheist thinking, his promotion of theist beliefs through the figure of Christ. Thus, between 1767 and 1771, ‘Voltaire a répété les expressions de son attachement à Jésus, son “frère”, son “maître”, et même son “seul maître”’. However, we might further ask ourselves whether Voltaire’s gradual change in attitude regarding Jesus again relates to the end of the period of crisis we are exploring, whether it represents a greater coming to terms with his own place in the Judeo-Christian world – a self-acceptance that leads to a more actively tolerant attitude for all social groups, and one that embraces all human weakness and difference, whether it be Jewish, Christian or any other.³³⁸

³³⁶ *Sermon des cinquante*, p.443, p.448, p.450.

³³⁷ Voltaire: ‘*L’Ingénu*’ and ‘*Histoire de Jenni*’, p.xxxix.

³³⁸ *La Religion de Voltaire*, p.377, p.379.

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Essai sur les mœurs and La Philosophie de l'histoire

In the *Essai sur les mœurs* Voltaire writes that the Christian religion in attempting to define itself has adopted the views of others. Just as the ancient Jews took articles of their faith from those with whom they came in contact, so Christianity has embraced the thinking of different peoples. But he suggests that, in following certain beliefs, the Church has frequently confused simple people by the obscurity of its complex ideas. At the same time, according to Voltaire, when adopting the metaphysical theories of Greek philosophy, Christianity subsequently failed to embrace fully the more enlightened teachings of the early thinkers: 'Les philosophes platoniciens d'Alexandrie, où il y avait tant de Juifs, se joignent aux premiers chrétiens, qui empruntent des expressions de leur philosophie, comme celle du *Logos*, sans emprunter toutes leur idées' (1756).³³⁹

For Voltaire the contradictions found between the various sects of Christianity regarding the different dogmas expose the nonsensical nature of such thinking. He asks: 'Qu'importe, en effet, que les chrétiens reconnaissent dans Jésus Christ un Dieu portion indivisible de Dieu, et pourtant séparée, ou qu'ils révèrent dans lui la première créature de Dieu?' (1775). Such arguments based on 'incomprehensible systems' ignore the 'lois de la morale', laws that in encouraging the love of neighbour, are understandable and essential to all mankind. To illustrate further his separation between a logical universal religion and the dogmatic teachings of Catholics and Protestants that are founded on obscure metaphysics, Voltaire makes use of the figurative paradigm of the *anabaptistes anglais*. These, in his eyes, while 'se croyant chrétiens, et ne se piquant nullement de philosophie, [...] n'étaient réellement que des déistes'. Contending that 'les plus savants d'entre eux prétendaient que le terme de *filz de Dieu* ne signifie chez les Hébreux qu'*homme de bien*, comme *filz de Satan* ou de *Bélial* ne veut dire que *méchant homme*' (1756), he takes his questioning to the heart of the accepted Church teaching; he attempts to destroy the reality of Christ's incarnation by representing it as a mere continuation of the anthropomorphic beliefs of early or pagan religions. He shows

³³⁹ *Essai sur les mœurs*, I, 223.

how, from early history, individuals who have rejected the authorized doctrines of faith have been denigrated or condemned by others.

Tous les dieux de l'antiquité étaient adorés sous une forme humaine; et ce qui montre bien à quel point les hommes sont injustes, c'est que chez les Grecs on flétrissait du nom d'athées ceux qui n'admettaient pas ces dieux corporels, et qui adoraient dans la Divinité une nature inconnue, invisible, inaccessible à nos sens. (1756)

The historical example acts as a metaphor for the situation regarding the free-thinkers, the deists and non-conformists of the eighteenth century, against whom the accusations of heresy or atheism were often laid.³⁴⁰

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La Pucelle

In *La Pucelle* Voltaire ridicules the half-man, half-god nature of Hermaphrodix. Presenting him as the 'noble' and 'very worthy' offspring of a divine spirit and a Benedictine nun, this work not only mockingly questions the alleged chastity of those in holy orders, but also undermines the morality of all religious parties who have given their own manipulative interpretation to stories or supposed events that otherwise would be conceived as a contradiction to the particular moralities that they profess to hold. This move implies an attack on the Christian accounts relating to Christ's birth, while also characteristically emphasizing the fictional element of all such revered stories; Voltaire connects his poetic figure to those of classical mythology. His mockery then further undermines the notion of Hermaphrodix's divine 'double nature' (1730-62) by linking this individual's spiritual-human duality to another equally ambiguous characteristic, one that by indicating androgyny or bisexuality further reduces the representation from the realm of the purely metaphysical to that of basic physicality.³⁴¹

But here once more Voltaire expands his indictment to include the alleged

³⁴⁰ *Essai sur les mœurs*, III, 129; II, 320-21 (Moland's italics); I, 177.

³⁴¹ *La Pucelle*, IV, 283, p.330.

chosenness of the Christians, in particular the Jansenists. Although F.A. Taylor in his edition of the *Lettres philosophiques* contends that the writer's representation of Pascal's belief in predestination is exaggerated, or even 'misrepresented', in *La Pucelle* Voltaire again draws attention to this perceived element of Jansenist teaching.³⁴² The Jansenist is the 'esclave du destin', the 'enfant perdu de la grâce efficace' (1730-62). God is the provider of such justice and grace: 'Quesnel l'a dit, nul ne peut en douter' (1730-62). Through irony, Voltaire condemns the injustice of an arbitrary distribution of grace, the unfair treatment of those who are rejected through no fault of their own. This reiterates his criticism of all groups who seek to distinguish themselves by claiming a specious right to special status or to preferential treatment. And, in addition, the poem furthers the argument against the Church's intentional use of obscure language to spread its message. Voltaire describes Saint Denis adopting 'very consoling', 'theological' and unintelligible words to persuade the uneducated Jeanne to embark on her divinely ordained mission (1730-62), an indictment that is reinforced in *Candide* through the figure of Pangloss who acts as the metaphor for the propagation of all such abstruse doctrines – ones that he does not understand himself – and through Candide who, for much of the story, appears as the unquestioning receiver of that message.³⁴³

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'Juifs'

Further considering Voltaire's representation of chosenness, we discover that the argument becomes more complicated in the undated section III of 'Juifs'. Here he emphasizes the way the Christians have interpreted the dispersion of the Jewish people as an anachronistic punishment for their failure to recognize Christ as the Messiah, an accusation of foolish non-awareness that in the *antipascal* he presents as unwarranted, since the 'monarch' (the poor and crucified Jesus) had not appeared in the manner that the Jews had expected; in this earlier text Voltaire asks how they could have recognized 'un Dieu caché sous la figure d'un Juif circoncis, qui par sa religion nouvelle a détruit et rendu abominables la

³⁴² *Lettres philosophiques*, (repr. 1992) p.184.

³⁴³ *La Pucelle*, III, 137-38, p.304; IV, 158, p.325; II, 192, p.285.

circumcision et le sabbat, fondements sacrés de la loi judaïque' (1734).³⁴⁴ He thus excuses the Jews for their alleged failure. But in 'Juifs' he elaborates the figure further in order to increase the force of his criticism against the Church. Excoriating the devious pragmatism that has coloured Christian treatment of the very people from whom it takes its authority, he writes: 'Ce qu'il y a de singulier, c'est que les chrétiens ont prétendu accomplir les prophéties en tyrannisant les Juifs qui les leur avaient transmises' (undated). Voltaire dismantles the usual representation of Judaic causality by removing its negativity from the Jews and placing the blame for subsequent failures squarely on the Christians. They, according to Voltaire, have manipulated their claimed heritage to their own advantage so as to pursue their own selfish agenda. Denying the special, chosen nature of the Jews, the Christians have in fact appropriated this claim so as to embellish their own status; they have founded their particular identity on the same premise as that which they have taken from their despised other.³⁴⁵ Žizek explores the paradox that exists within this causality:

Saint Paul conceives of the Christian community as the new incarnation of the chosen people: it is Christians who are the true 'children of Abraham'. What was, in its first incarnation, a distinct ethnic group is now a community of free believers that suspends all ethnic divisions (or, rather, cuts a line of separation within each ethnic group) – the chosen people are those who have faith in Christ. Thus we have a kind of '*transubstantiation*' of the chosen people: God kept his promise of redemption to the Jewish people, but, in the process itself, he changed the identity of the chosen people. (author's italics)³⁴⁶

But Voltaire's discourse once more exposes the promises declared by the Almighty as the mythical creations of mankind, not the embodiment of a God-given religion or the expression of a universal morality, but the workings of a particularized interpretation of *la morale*.

³⁴⁴ *Lettres philosophiques*, II, 198.

³⁴⁵ 'Juifs', p.524.

³⁴⁶ *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, p.130.

The task of analyzing Voltaire's representation of the contemporary stereotypes entails constantly asking in what places he repeats unquestioningly the popular false figures and where he rejects them. Even if seeking to mark a separation between his conscious indulgence of fantasy images and those instances where the unconscious fantasy can be discerned on the surface of his discourse, we need to observe how at times he intentionally plays on the stereotypes in order to engage his reader. But his very adoption of such figures reintroduces the paradox that exists in any drive for the tolerance of the other, that is the personal dislike, disapproval or distaste that gives rise to a consciousness of the need in the self for an extension of such tolerance. In his apparent desire to define an identity for the Jews, Voltaire repeatedly alleges the existence of certain undesirable 'Jewish' attributes or practices, and these remarks reveal the tensions in his own thinking. Such negative statements express his need to explain to himself his antipathy and to find a clear-cut distinction between what he views as worthy or unworthy of tolerance.

We have seen how in his article 'Tolérance' he draws attention to the aporia that exists in a meaningful interpretation, and argues that the tolerance of the ancient Romans allowed for the growth of the new Christian sect, which in turn was to become the instigator of subsequent savage acts of fanaticism – a causality in which intolerance is an effect of tolerance. In the nineteenth-century Garnier Frères edition the article opens with the following questions: '*La tolérance serait-elle un aussi grand mal que l'intolérance? Et la liberté de conscience est-elle un fléau aussi barbare que les bûchers de l'Inquisition?*' (undated: editor's italics). However, we should note that this first section, found in the Moland *Œuvres complètes* and omitted by later editions of the article, was taken by Beuchot from a copy of Decroix, one of the editors of the Kehl publications.³⁴⁷ Despite that, this passage was excluded from Kehl, and did not appear until the Perronneau edition. But, as Gunnar von Proschwitz indicates, Kehl presents us with a problem, one that he does not seek to answer definitely: 'Une question se pose ici: est-ce que l'on peut se fier à l'édition de Kehl, est-ce que son texte reproduit avec fidélité le

³⁴⁷ 'Tolérance', M.xx, p.517.

texte de Voltaire?’³⁴⁸ Brumfitt and Gerard Davis comment that the ‘Kehl editors [...] showed themselves occasionally capable of making minor corrections on their own responsibility’, but ‘it is highly unlikely’ that they would have included a long passage ‘if they had not been convinced of its authenticity’.³⁴⁹ Schwarzbach agrees that if such texts were available to the Kehl editors, they could indeed have been rejected because of doubts concerning authenticity: for certain later additions he finds Beuchot to be ‘the sole authority’. In the case of such materials, he argues that ‘there is little likelihood that Voltaire had intended their publication’. As for the article ‘Tolérance’, here Schwarzbach suggests that the Kehl editors’ suppressed the passage in Decroix’s possession possibly because it could be ‘a sketch for almost any of Voltaire’s essays on tolerance and adds nothing unfamiliar’.³⁵⁰ But if we accept (with reservations) the above citation as it stands, we find in it a summary of two insoluble problems, ones that Voltaire raises repeatedly: should we be held responsible for the unforeseen outcomes of our often well-intentioned actions; should we place limits on our tolerance? Having considered the first question, we now concentrate on the second.

Voltaire points to a need for some parameters. In Chapter XVIII of the *Traité sur la tolérance* he questions the dilemma whether or not it is ‘permis de faire un petit mal pour un grand bien’ (1763) – a repetition of his polemic on the teachings of Saint Augustine, earlier the subject of his satirical *conte*, *Cosi-Sancta* (composed 1714-16: first published Kehl). The message now becomes darker, referring to institutionalized acts of savagery performed in the name of religious obedience to a divine order. But, as universal morality calls for the good of society, wherever certain deeds, ‘examples of fanaticism’, are against the laws of the realm or republic, the perpetrators of such actions must be contained. ‘Crimes’ against society deserve to be persecuted by the state. His examples of those in the contemporary world whose fanatical religious beliefs, reprehensible maxims, might merit another’s intolerance include the Jesuits, Franciscans, Protestants, and the Jews; in the last case he bases his reasoning solely on a satirical hypothesis founded on the Jews’ obedience to God’s commandments in the Old Testament.

³⁴⁸ ‘Beaumarchais et Voltaire: l’édition de Kehl’, p.452.

³⁴⁹ ‘*L’Ingenu*’ and ‘*Histoire de Jenni*’, p.145, note 151.

³⁵⁰ ‘The problem of the Kehl additions to the *Dictionnaire philosophique*’, p.44, p.46.

With a clearly implied mocking reference to the Jewish texts, he alleges that were they to become masters 'they could well' kill all idolaters leaving only 'nubile young girls'. In light of such episodes in the biblical narrative, Voltaire shows repressive intolerance as being in accordance with the *droit humain*, and he concludes the chapter with the comment: 'Ce sont à peu près les seuls cas où l'intolérance paraît raisonnable' (1763). Earlier in Chapter IV of the same text, he argues that the Emperor of China's expulsion of the Jesuits arose not from his intolerance, but from the intolerance of the brotherhood itself.³⁵¹ But in the *Prix de la justice et de l'humanité* Voltaire reinforces the reservation that must be placed on state intervention. While a ruler may commit his act of intolerance in order to control another's criminal activities against the state, such control must not itself become criminal: 'un crime est toujours crime', and he adds: 'La vraie raison d'État consiste à vous précautionner contre les crimes de vos ennemis, non pas à en commettre' (1777). Throughout his *œuvre* Voltaire stresses his conviction that all punishment or repression should not be excessively harsh, but should be relative to the seriousness of the crime; where possible the aim should be to bring about a reform in the behaviour of offenders so that they might become useful members of society.³⁵²

In Chapter IX of the *Traité de métaphysique* (1734-37) Voltaire distinguishes between a universal and a particularized understanding of morality. For him, the former is based on a commonly held idea of what is good for society, founded on an absence of lying, cheating, deceiving and doing harm to one's fellow beings. In line with this, he represents any failure to live up to the standards set by universal morality as wrong. But, while he shows several of the activities of certain groups as entirely deserving of condemnation, he repeatedly marks out a clear distinction between those wrongdoings which are merely contemptible, and those which by reason of being intentionally detrimental to others are intolerable.

On the rarer occasions that he mockingly represents the contemporary Jews, his contempt conforms to the popular stereotypes, whereas when he describes the Christians he usually adopts either his own figures or those of other *philosophes*; contrary to eighteenth-century public opinion, his representation of the Christians

³⁵¹ *Traité sur la tolérance*, p.238.

³⁵² *Prix de la justice*, p.572.

shows them as deserving of intolerance in the light of their own brutality. Not always acknowledging that the Jews have been forced into their unpopular trades, he represents them following supposedly corrupt practices and reputedly revering (what he designates as) disgusting or abominable biblical traditions – it is in this last category that the mocking passage of the *Traité sur la tolérance* belongs. But he also shows that, unlike the Christians, and unlike their so-called legendary biblical ancestors, the present-day Jews do not engage in criminal activities that seek to deprive others of the rights belonging to all mankind, or that are purposely detrimental to the good of society as a whole. Thus, while Voltaire frequently portrays Christianity as deserving of the intolerance of others, he represents the ‘modern’ followers of Judaism, despite their reputedly reprehensible customs and traditions, as meriting the dues owing to all human beings – a contention that obviously pertains to the fact that unlike the Jews, so-called ‘true’ Christians were not, in his time, discriminated against *as such*. And, Voltaire further clearly distinguishes between foolish self-deception and the wilful misleading of others, between the subject’s own ignorance and that it deviously imposes on vulnerable people. He writes: ‘Quiconque n’est coupable que de se tromper mérite compassion, quiconque persécute mérite d’être traité comme une bête féroce’ (1777). In this chapter addressing *la morale* we consider Voltaire’s treatment of these issues, issues still pertinent today.³⁵³

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Accusations of ‘perversity and falsity’ in the Jewish people

First we have to consider in more detail the grounds that Voltaire asserts for his mocking antipathy and dismissive contempt for Jewish people whose cause at times he promotes. Accordingly, we find that he goes further when embracing many of the commonly held fantasies of his period by conflating these with others that he perceives as representative of the Jewish character as a whole. In addition to the figures of non-belonging, wandering, proliferation, arrogance and misguidedness, he introduces another still more negative mark of identity: a

³⁵³ *Histoire de l’établissement du christianisme*, p.116.

general lack of *la morale*. While, in the contemporary Jews, this becomes represented in terms of their alleged apathy, among the (for him) mythical people of the Old Testament, the failure appears as an ignoring of those universal *lois fondamentales* which all mankind understands – the natural perception of the just and the unjust that in *Le Philosophe ignorant* Voltaire discovers ‘even’ in the Jews. In ‘Morale’ he contends that the activities of the biblical Jews indicate that they ‘manquaient de morale ou manquaient à la morale’ (1767).³⁵⁴

Here we come to the problem that underlies all Voltaire’s argument: theological disputes have brought about a history of bloodshed as a result of the way that ‘on a toujours négligé la morale pour le dogme’ (1756).³⁵⁵ But the ideal religion should be devoid of dogma, obeying the precepts of the commonly understood universal morality. Voltaire therefore expresses his wish that ‘on laisse reposer le dogme, on n’annonce que la morale’ (1763).³⁵⁶ Further emphasizing this separation of man-made dogma and God-given morality, he writes: ‘Les rites établis divisent aujourd’hui le genre humain, et la morale le réunit’ (1765), a statement whose meaning he then expands with the remark that: ‘La morale est une, elle vient de Dieu; les dogmes sont différents, ils viennent de nous’ (1765).³⁵⁷

Repeatedly expounding the divisive nature of dogma, Voltaire does not acknowledge that in religion there is any need for that ritual which Douglas shows to be ‘the condition of its existence’.³⁵⁸ While she demonstrates that the religious is transmitted through the symbolism of ritual just as the social is through the symbolism of language, Voltaire constantly calls for a separation between a God-given universal morality and humanly contrived dogma and religious practices. In his notebooks he writes: ‘Toutes les religions *hors la nôtre* sont l’ouvrage des hommes, c’est pourquoi elles diffèrent. La morale est la même, elle vient de dieu et est une comme lui’ (1735-50: my italics). Here my emphasis indicates the addition to the text that Voltaire included above the line, one that gives Besterman reason to remark that ‘it is amusing to see Voltaire being cautious even in a private notebook’. This last comment reminds us of the caution with which we

³⁵⁴ ‘Morale’, p.398.

³⁵⁵ *Essai sur les mœurs*, III, 177.

³⁵⁶ *Remarques pour servir de supplément à l’Essai sur les mœurs*, p.553.

³⁵⁷ *La Philosophie de l’histoire*, p.152; ‘Juste(du) et de l’injuste’, p.283.

³⁵⁸ *Purity and danger*, p.77.

must interpret all this writer's discourse.³⁵⁹

Even while expressing a faith in the gradual development of mankind's reasoning, Voltaire makes the elitist pronouncement that enlightenment still remains beyond the understanding of the majority of people: 'Le monde s'améliore un peu; oui, le monde pensant, mais le monde brute sera longtemps un composé d'ours et de singes, et la canaille sera toujours cent contre un' (1777).³⁶⁰ In *Le Dîner du Comte de Boulainvilliers* Voltaire has the Abbé set out the problem for the propagation of a universal religion that is founded solely on the commonly understood morality. Such a religion will never exist as unthinking people will always turn to superstition: 'Une religion de philosophes n'est pas faite pour les hommes' (1767). Voltaire shows that in all societies there is a division between those who think and those who do not, and he demonstrates how a lack of enlightenment is present in all groups.³⁶¹

Thus, having accepted that dogmas do exist among religious believers, Voltaire takes his argument further and in the *Sermon des cinquante* suggests that any theological dictates which violate morality will serve to negate the truth of the religion that holds them sacred: 'La religion doit être conforme à la morale, et universelle comme elle: ainsi toute religion dont les dogmes offensent la morale est certainement fausse.' He contends that the Jews have proved the false nature of their religion by its rejection of universal morality and by the sanctification of acts that are in contradiction to it. In this way he deprecates and condemns Judaism for two failings, which he defines as its falsity as evidenced by its unethical tenets, and its failure to teach a moral message.³⁶²

He creates a figure of broken religious continuity, a chain of different, ever-changing beliefs, linked from the ancient Phœnicians to the biblical Jews, and eventually to the Christians. His figure presents the perpetuation of man-made fable, and this exposes the absence of a timeless, true faith grounded in the adoration of the universal God. But the figure of unoriginality becomes more critical with his claim that the Jews, having taken the fables of others, have created imitations that are even more false. He writes: 'Le misérable peuple juif,

³⁵⁹ 'Leningrad Notebooks', p.348.

³⁶⁰ *Prix de la justice*, p.549.

³⁶¹ *Le Dîner du Comte de Boulainvilliers*, p.396.

³⁶² *Sermon des cinquante*, p.439.

nouvellement établi dans ses rochers entre la Phénicie, l'Égypte, et la Syrie, prit toutes les superstitions de ses voisins, et, dans l'excès de sa brutale ignorance, il y ajouta des superstitions nouvelles' (1768). He lifts the perceived unoriginality of the Jews into another sphere: a feebleness, uninventiveness of mind becomes characterized by a more actively negative figure, one presenting their examples of the Bible as dishonest and harmful to the good of society.³⁶³

Voltaire then expands his representation by investing it with social and personal characteristics; he identifies the Jews by their occupations (money-lenders, financial middle-men, second-hand clothes dealers) with the supposedly attendant attributes of greed, deceitfulness and unoriginality – since he understands the social restrictions that have forced certain roles on the Jews, we can only find it reprehensible that he allows himself to use the commonly perceived characteristics of these occupations as metaphors for the Jewish character. In his notebooks Voltaire points to how such rhetorical figures can be used effectively: 'Les pensées d'un auteur doivent entrer dans notre âme comme la lumière dans nos yeux, avec plaisir et sans effort, et les métaphores doivent être comme un verre qui couvre les objets mais qui les laisse voir' (1735-50?).³⁶⁴ Like humour, metaphor contains a deeper meaning for the reader to discover. So Voltaire's descriptions of the Jewish texts, beliefs and customs are often couched in the stereotypically negative language usually appertaining to their trades: they are described in terms of plagiarism, mendaciousness, falsity, fraudulence, treachery and theft. In a letter to Joseph Michel Antoine Servan Voltaire uses this critical figure to scorn Jewish claims to originality; for him the Jews are only second-hand clothes dealers who have 'retourné les habits des anciens' (13 April 1766).³⁶⁵ This metaphor repeats the thinking found in his comment of the previous year, where he writes: 'Les Juifs firent donc de l'histoire et de la fable ancienne ce que leurs fripiers font de leurs vieux habits; ils les retournent et les vendent comme neufs le plus chèrement qu'ils peuvent'. Contending that the Jews are an 'ignorant', 'uncouth' people lacking in imagination, Voltaire represents them as having recycled their traditions, even those of their religion, in the same way as

³⁶³ A.B.C., pp.334-35.

³⁶⁴ 'Leningrad Notebooks', p.346.

³⁶⁵ D13250.

they have recycled their old garments. He continues:

Lors donc qu'on voit un ancien rite, une ancienne opinion établie en Égypte ou en Asie, et chez les Juifs, il est bien naturel de penser que le petit peuple nouveau, ignorant, grossier, toujours privé des arts, a copié, comme il a pu, la nation antique, florissante et industrieuse.

(1767)³⁶⁶

He again makes use of the stereotypical image of the Jews, their supposed involvement in dishonest imitation, with the comment:

C'est une erreur absurde d'avoir imaginé que les Juifs fussent les seuls qui reconnussent un dieu unique: c'était la doctrine de presque tout l'Orient, et les Juifs en cela ne furent que des plagiaires, comme ils le furent en tout.

(1767)³⁶⁷

By a rhetorical use of repetition, this message is reinforced in *Dieu et les hommes*, where he sarcastically attributes to the Jews a plagiaristic nature, the appropriation of the customs and practices of others:

Ils empruntent les noms de Dieu chez les Phéniciens; ils prennent les anges chez les Persans; ils ont l'arche errante des Arabes; ils adoptent le baptême des Indiens, la circoncision des prêtres d'Égypte, leurs vêtements, leur vache rousse, leur chérubins, qui ont une tête de veau et une tête d'épervier, leur bouc Hazazel, et cent autres cérémonies.

(1769)³⁶⁸

Moreover, just as the texts are described in terms of falsity, their beliefs in terms of plagiarism, and their social practices in terms of fraud and forgery, the character of the people is described in terms of treachery. This appears in Voltaire's letter to Cardinal Dubois regarding Salomon Levi – one of the rare instances where he indicts a named Jewish individual. Here he contends that 'a Jew', by not belonging to any country, 'peut aussi bien trahir le roi pour l'empereur que l'empereur pour le roi' (28 May 1722).³⁶⁹ Schwarzbach accuses

³⁶⁶ 'Abraham', p.297, p.298 (later additions to the 1764 text).

³⁶⁷ 'Job', p.250.

³⁶⁸ *Dieu et les hommes*, p.351.

³⁶⁹ D106.

Arthur Hertzberg of taking 'Voltaire's anti-semitism for granted' and contends that, when charging Voltaire and Diderot, he 'refuses to consider the possible excuse of validity for the stereotype of the grasping, unscrupulous Jew'.³⁷⁰ But, despite his highly negative representation of Voltaire, despite seeing him as 'the major link in Western intellectual history between the anti-Semitism of classical paganism and the modern age', Hertzberg allows that 'there was probably some truth in Voltaire's charges against Lévi'.³⁷¹ Jory acknowledges that the slurs in this 'strange' letter may be 'regrettable', but suggests that 'they are mild in comparison' to those found in other writings of the time.³⁷² As for Pomeau, in this case he marks out a pragmatism on Voltaire's part, a desire to separate himself from those with whom he identifies. Pomeau comments:

Antisémitisme où la religion n'entre pour rien. A cette date, nulle trace encore de l'antijudaïsme qui inspirera si souvent les attaques ultérieures. Ici la nécessité de se distinguer du Juif, dont il deviendrait en fait l'associé, l'amène à reprendre les thèmes de l'antisémitisme ambiant.³⁷³

We shall later consider the significance of Pomeau's observation regarding the integration of Voltaire's idea of self with his identification of the Jews, but here we might also perceive an alternative message directed at the Christians as a whole. While the young Voltaire presents a figure of Jewish treachery, and while, as Aldridge proposes, he emphasizes 'the trade of money-lender, which everyone despised', he also suggests the part played by Christian Europe in the perceived character of the Jews. Because the former refuses to offer full assimilation and integration to the Jewish people, it cannot expect loyalty from those it excludes.³⁷⁴

Gay, writing in the 1950s, points to the way Voltaire 'urged Jews to assimilate themselves to Western civilization by abandoning their dietary laws and their "hatred" of other nations'.³⁷⁵ Katz explores how in his answer to Pinto, 'Voltaire, as it were, opened up the way for a vision of the Jew's future in enlightened

³⁷⁰ 'The Jews and the Enlightenment anew', p.365, p.362.

³⁷¹ *The French Enlightenment and the Jews*, p.135, note.

³⁷² 'Voltaire and the Jews of Metz', p.98.

³⁷³ *Voltaire en son temps*, I, 114.

³⁷⁴ *Voltaire and the Century of Light*, p.36.

³⁷⁵ *Voltaire's Politics*, p.351.

society' – a figure that might be interpreted as an embracing of 'the good Jew'. But Katz criticizes Voltaire's suggestion of assimilation, particularly as it appears in the *Essai sur les mœurs* (Chapter CIV: 1761) where he links the Gypsies with the Jews. For Katz, the representation on this occasion is indicative of Voltaire's belief in an eventual disappearance of the Jewish people, and he shows how the writer suggests that, when they cease to be useful as merchants, the Jews will lose their separate identity. Katz summarizes:

When they stop fulfilling this function, they will lose the basis of their existence and disappear inevitably. He is no longer talking in terms of the Christian concept of absorption of the Jews through conversion, but rather of gradual assimilation into the scum of mankind, the despised masses, to which they already belong and which will eventually swallow them up.³⁷⁶

While this swallowing up would involve the impoverished majority of the Jewish people, we have to remember that for Voltaire such elitist thinking was in line with his views relating to the unenlightened *canaille* at large. But it has been normal in recent years to question any promotion of assimilation, and David Theo Goldberg writes:

liberals are moved to overcome the racial differences they tolerate and have been so instrumental in fabricating by diluting them, by bleaching them out through assimilation or integration. The liberal would assume away the difference in otherness, maintaining thereby the dominance of a presumed sameness, the universally imposed similarity in identity.

He then further elaborates:

Perceived failures of some racially defined groups to advance or integrate are then taken to turn not on dominant boundary construction, restriction, and exclusion but on the absence of certain kinds of values on the part of the group itself. This paradigmatic disposition to blame the victim implicitly reifies as given the very definition of otherness it is claiming to erode, much as it takes for granted the assumption of ethnic identification it valorizes.³⁷⁷

³⁷⁶ *From Prejudice to Destruction*, p.46, p.47.

³⁷⁷ *Racist Culture*, p.7, p.78.

Assimilation thus loses any positive connotation that implies an embracing of the other, and it becomes invested solely with an element of refusal that calls for a rejection of what marks the other as other. This links to a negative causality that legitimizes the blame placed on the outgroup for the treatment it receives from the ingroup.

Applying this argument to our field of enquiry, we find that in the passage referred to by Katz the discourse implies that the Jews are partly responsible for their own treatment; setting aside religious issues, Voltaire indicates that in order to deserve people's understanding and acceptance they need to convert to the social ways of Christian Europe. In this case, the particular has become the standard for the universal. Likewise, in the profoundly critical *Examen important de Milord Bolingbroke*, Voltaire represents the ancient Jews as responsible for their own victimhood: 'les Juifs furent si longtemps réduits à un esclavage que leur brigandages avaient tant mérité' (1766). At the same time, in this text he repeats the message of the *Essai sur les mœurs*; he links the Jews and Gypsies and exposes a relationship between usefulness or non-usefulness and continued survival or disappearance. But in the *Examen* this figure undergoes a change of emphasis, one that gives greater prominence to a separation between the Jews and the Gypsies: Voltaire shows the Jews and Banians as different from the latter in that they continue to exist by trade. In this passage, therefore, he spotlights the role of the individual's personal responsibility for aspects of his existence, an existence that is partly dictated by the way that individual chooses to live his life *in face of* the treatment he receives from others.³⁷⁸

These statements show how at times, with regard to the question of causality, Voltaire's thinking appears ambivalent. On one count, he indicates that it is no wonder that the Jews carry the burden of guilt and are punished for their past violence, while, on another, he demolishes this argument by representing them as victims and all humanity as equally guilty of immorality. But the Jews are the only people who have been historically punished, and Voltaire apparently questions the injustice of such selectiveness where guilt is universal. So at times, when seeking to find an answer to this conundrum, he reverts to the contemporary

³⁷⁸ *Examen important*, p.174, p.286.

negative thinking and finds a reason for their status as victims in aspects of their own behaviour which have brought about the actions of others. When suggesting deservedness, he claims that their savage and intolerant behaviour in biblical times has earned them the hatred of the world. Similarly, he continues to portray the Jews in terms of a misplaced pride in their claims to chosenness, citing this as a primary cause of their persecution by others, by those whom they exclude from the special status. His attack in 'Âme' bases Jewish responsibility on this allegedly self-made causality. Subsequent to God's promises and menaces in Deuteronomy, they, the chosen people of God, believe that 'il n'y a rien que de temporel', and that at the hands of others they must suffer in this world for their sins (1764). Yet, while here the discourse is in tune with the contemporary fantasies, Voltaire still insists that they do not deserve to be treated with intolerance.³⁷⁹

Sometimes he allows himself to make the attack more personal; he does not restrict his accusation of deservedness to higher moral or social issues, but extends it to the stereotypically banal, an action which lets him give further voice to his mockery. On occasion, therefore, the Jews become represented in the humiliating terms of disease or dirtiness. In *Dieu et les hommes* he repeats the ancient charge that the biblical Jews were 'une troupe de lépreux chassés d'Égypte', 'vagabonds sujets à la lèpre' (1769), and in *La Bible enfin expliquée* he says 'que de nos jours même la populace de cette nation est si malpropre et si puante' (1776).³⁸⁰ Voltaire adopts the figure of the unclean as a marker of differentiation, in this case investing his representation with a quality of timelessness. He projects onto the Jews an enduring figure of dirtiness and unhealthiness that becomes seen as an indicated reason for their non-acceptance and persecution throughout the ages. Here the historical blurring is complete. But, while in this case Voltaire uses the defamatory stereotype to diminish the standing of the people, he repeatedly emphasizes that the Jewish social condition has been, and continues to be, in large part the result of the treatment that they have received. Poverty, squalor and ill-

³⁷⁹ 'Âme', p.314.

³⁸⁰ *Dieu et les hommes*, p.337; *La Bible enfin expliquée*, p.119, note 3. Dennis Prager and Joseph Telushken show this representation of leprosy to be a calumny that was started in the third century B.C.E. by the Egyptian priest Manetho; it was also repeated by Tacitus and Marx. (*Why the Jews?*, p.69.)

health are not fixed characteristics; they are markers, not of an essence, but of an existence that can be rectified.

Voltaire's correspondence with Cardinal Dubois dates from his early years, but at the end of his life in 1773 he writes a comparable letter to the Chevalier de Lisle. Here the prejudiced negativity of the text presents serious problems for the modern critic. He remarks:

Je sais qu'il y a quelques Juifs dans les colonies anglaises. Ces marauds-là vont partout où il y a de l'argent à gagner, comme les Guèbres, les Banians, les Arméniens, courent toute l'Asie, et comme les prêtres isiaques venaient, sous le nom de Bohêmes, voler des poules dans les basses-cours, et dire la bonne aventure. Mais que ces déprépucés d'Israël, qui vendent de vieilles culottes aux sauvages, se disent de la tribu de Nephthali ou d'Issachar, cela est fort peu important; ils n'en sont pas moins les plus grands gueux qui aient jamais souillé la face du globe.

(15 December 1773)³⁸¹

Parts of this passage are frequently quoted by those who wish to condemn Voltaire for his anti-Jewish, or even 'antisemitic' attitudes, but selective reading or incomplete references can lead to distorted or incorrect interpretations and the letter should be viewed as a whole. There is no doubt that here he repeats many of the stereotypical fantasies, that is to say the connection between the Jews and other wandering or marginalized peoples, and their similarity to the allegedly 'thieving' Gypsies. Voltaire re-emphasizes the Jews' involvement in avaricious or demeaning practices and trades, and his mocking tone reintroduces his dual indictment: he dismisses the contemporary, supposedly unenlightened Jews who continue with their so-called despicable activities, and he sardonically demolishes the truths of their Judaic past, thereby reinforcing his critical biblical exegesis. We must here acknowledge some further manipulative amalgamating of the Jewish past and present. Voltaire shows his desire to strengthen his general criticism of the Jews by embroidering his two representations of them (the ancient and the modern) with implied or open reference to certain faults attributed to the other. But again, while the attack appears most clearly directed against the contemporary Jewish people, the main underlying message is not to represent them in terms of

³⁸¹ D18687.

perceived timeless characteristics, but to demolish the assumed veracity of their chosen status and their sole possession of the word of God. The letter sets out a mocking illustration of the impossible paradox that Judaism presents for Voltaire, the (for him) incompatible connection between the Jews' exclusive claims to the divine and the incongruous realities of their actual existence, one lived in a state of deprivation and victimhood. Rather than a credible presentation of their so-called continued historical entity, this is a mocking and manipulative demolition of their enduring chosenness, an argument that contrives to convince the reader of the illogical nature of the Jewish claims.

The significance of this passage lies in the fact that it is found so late in Voltaire's life, at a period when most of his Jewish discourse is concerned with attacking the Judaic religion, and at a time when there is little evidence of similarly unbalanced writing against contemporary Jews. Those accusing Voltaire of antisemitism reiterate the same few defamatory passages (including the above cited correspondence), a repetition that attests to the scarcity of other similar documents. Accepting Jennifer Tsien's theory regarding the place of taste (or its absence) in Voltaire's private works, in this letter to de Lisle he may have allowed himself to exceed the bounds of acceptable or well-moderated discourse in a mistaken desire to amuse an associate: he permits himself to make full play of the contemporary fantasies about the Jews. The derisive tone of the text as a whole, including the way it addresses other non-Jewish issues, gives credence to this argument. Voltaire reveals in his mockingly self-deprecating conclusion the spirit in which he intends the letter to be read: 'Conservez vos bontés pour le vieux bavard malingre.'

In *Un Chrétien contre six Juifs*, Voltaire directs his wit not just at Judaism's so-called irrational stories, but also at the accusations made against him by the Abbé Guénée in his highly successful *Lettres de quelques Juifs*. Seeking to restore his own reputation, Voltaire scornfully repudiates the Abbé's negative reading of his Jewish discourse, although he concedes that perhaps his hypothetical 'friend' has gone too far in his remarks:

mon ami a pu se permettre quelques petites libertés sur le peuple de Dieu, à l'exemple de

saint Jérôme. Mais quand il est allé trop loin (ce qu'il ne faut jamais faire), [...] il en a demandé pardon à M. Pinto, juif de Bordeaux, fort estimé des chrétiens. (1777)³⁸²

This apology does not appear entirely heartfelt and it suggests a certain mitigation of personal blame by its reference to a father of the early Church (with the accompanying implication of the Christian inheritance of anti-Judaism), but at the same time it does admit to 'the writer's' failure to be always responsible for what he says.

However, this brings us to a second point, one that is of equal importance for this study. By its appearing at such a late stage in Voltaire's life, the letter to Chevalier de Lisle indicates the presence of an enduring life-long disdain on his part for the unenlightened Jewish people. The message in this correspondence does not represent twenty/twenty-first century antisemitic thinking, but fits with the eighteenth-century anti-Jewish attitudes of scornful derision and sarcasm, a mind-set founded on the age-old Christian tradition. While these remarks certainly do not seek to exempt Voltaire from blame, I contend that they introduce once more the essential point of this thesis: this passage, in displaying attitudes that again serve to draw our attention to his permanent and deep-rooted contempt for most Jews, exposes how much he needed to set aside his personal prejudices before including them in his programme of universal tolerance.

* * *

Sermon des cinquante

In the *Sermon des cinquante* Voltaire contends that falsity characterizes the Bible and thus, emphasizing the deceptive nature of the holy texts and the unreliability of the books 'so falsely imputed to Moses', he speaks of 'le nombre infini de contradictions, qui sont le sceau de l'imposture'. The implication is deeply critical, stressing the intentionally fraudulent nature of the contradictions. This allows him to present a two-way argument: he postulates that the Jews have created a false religion based on dishonest dogmas, and that this religion has served to create the devious character of its people. He therefore proposes that it

³⁸² *Un Chrétien contre six Juifs*, p.503.

will be 'sous ce double aspect de perversité et de fausseté que nous examinerons dans ce discours les livres des Hébreux et de ceux qui leur ont succédé'. He savagely condemns the Jewish scriptures, alleging 'les traits contre la pureté, la charité, la bonne foi, la justice, et la raison universelle, que non seulement on trouve dans chaque chapitre, mais que, pour comble de malheur, on y trouve consacrés'. These episodes honoured by the Jews, sarcastically referred to by Voltaire as 'that holy people', contradict the reasoned faith in one God, 'récompensateur du bien, vengeur du mal'.³⁸³

He again traces the origin of these 'perverse' people back to 'the extravagant injustice' that dared accuse the Supreme Being 'd'avoir donné la parole à un serpent pour séduire une femme', an action that put an end to the 'innocent posterity' of Eve. This allows him to introduce his often declared conviction of a failure in the faith of the early Jews, the apparent absence of a belief in the afterlife with its promise of retribution for personal sins, even while that same faith held that future generations were to be punished for the actions of the parent. Voltaire contends that a belief in the immortality of the soul, an article of faith that promotes the individual's good behaviour, remains lacking from Jewish teaching during the 'barbarous centuries' of which he is speaking, an omission that evidences a lack of reason in these 'wretched people' who cannot appreciate the benefits of such a dogma to society as a whole.³⁸⁴ He introduces an element of didactic pragmatism, similar to that found in the *Lettres philosophiques* when he describes how the Anglican denomination persuaded the English people to profess adherence to the established faith: the followers of the English Church swore allegiance to the laws of the land and thereby they benefited society as a whole, and, in addition, promoted their own social advancement. Voltaire repeatedly combines pragmatism with religious spirituality: recorded statements and episodes from his own life illustrate both his conviction in the practical need for religion – as summed up in his famous, hypothetical comment that were there no religion 'il faudrait l'inventer' (1769) – and his appreciative acknowledgement of God's creation.³⁸⁵ The documented evidence of his expressions of wonderment on two

³⁸³ *Sermon des cinquante*, p.444, p.441, p.439, p.442, p.438.

³⁸⁴ *Sermon des cinquante*, p.439.

³⁸⁵ *Épître à l'auteur du livre des trois imposteurs*, p.403.

occasions (that of the frosty, starry night spent outdoors with Madame de Châtelet when their carriage broke down, and that of his early morning walk in the mountains near Ferney) appear to concur with Freind's comment in the *Histoire de Jenni*: 'Pour savoir s'il est un dieu, je ne vous demande qu'une chose, c'est d'ouvrir les yeux' (1775).³⁸⁶

However, in the *Sermon des cinquante* Voltaire goes further and contends that by examining whether or not the holy scriptures conform to morality, we may discover 's'ils peuvent avoir quelque ombre de vraisemblance'. No true faith can be founded on immorality, and so he expounds the dishonest nature of the 'fable' of the daughters of Lot, and even more savagely condemns the reversal of morality in the story of King David. Here Voltaire not only shows that David 'est puni pour la seule bonne et sage action qu'il a faite' – the 'wise and useful' census of his people – but also, in an indictment that directly addresses the Christians, that Jesus' birth was recompense for the former's act of 'adulterous homicide'. Thus he justifies his demolition of the authenticity of the Jewish texts by introducing into his argument these attributes of non-retribution and unmerited or immoral reward.³⁸⁷

But Voltaire adds further weight to his charge of Jewish perversity and falsity. He stresses the unoriginality of the Jews by suggesting that even the name they gave their God, Adonai, 'du nom d'Adonis', was borrowed from the Phœnicians, and mockingly he describes the Children of Israel's arrival in the promised land, where 'la première personne qui introduit par une trahison ce peuple saint est une prostituée nommée Rahab'. In this latter case his intention is clear; by demonstrating that the fulfilment of God's promises to his chosen people was achieved through an act of treachery, he demolishes the Bible's moral claim and reduces the divine significance of the holy scriptures. For similar purpose, he emphasizes the reported falsehood of the patriarchs:

Nous n'insisterons point sur le mensonge d'Isaac, père des justes, qui dit que sa femme est sa sœur, soit qu'il ait renouvelé ce mensonge d'Abraham, soit qu'Abraham fût coupable en effet

³⁸⁶ *Histoire de Jenni*, p.553. For details of these episodes, see René Vaillot, *Voltaire en son temps*, I, 585, and René Pomeau, *La Religion de Voltaire*, pp.416-17.

³⁸⁷ *Sermon des cinquante*, p.439, p.443.

d'avoir fait de sa sœur sa propre femme; mais arrêtons-nous un moment au patriarche Jacob, qu'on nous donne comme le modèle des hommes. Il force son frère, qui meurt de faim, de lui céder son droit d'aînesse pour une assiette de lentilles; ensuite il trompe son vieux père au lit de la mort.

This figure he then reinforces, extending the characteristic of the individual to include the whole group: 'Leur Dieu avait fait de Jacob un voleur, et il fait des voleurs de tout un peuple; il ordonne à son peuple de dérober et d'emporter tous les vases d'or et d'argent, et tous les ustensiles des Égyptiens.'³⁸⁸

In the *Sermon des cinquante* Voltaire makes no reference to Jewish victimhood caused by the prejudice of others; instead his literal repetition of the Bible stories serves to give a representation of their self-created calumny. He indicates that those wishing to attack Judaism have no need to create falsehoods, but may rely on the Jews' own holy texts for evidence of their perversity, abomination, savagery and immorality. And in the *Sermon* Voltaire makes another scornful reference to the Jews' alleged dirtiness, but now the accusation becomes more caustic by being placed in a magical context. He comments mockingly that the wise men of Egypt found themselves equal to the Jews in acts of sorcery, but 'il furent vaincus sur l'article des poux; les Juifs, en cette partie, en savaient plus que les autres nations'. He then takes the figure of the unclean to an even lower degree, representing the actions of the prophets in excremental terms. By his intentionally literal presentation of the story of Ezekiel, Voltaire reduces both the religious and the social to the level of the revolting.³⁸⁹

He condemns the role that sorcery and prophecy have played in the promulgation of religion; for Voltaire these are despicable and identifying Jewish practices, grounded in superstition. Mocking the Jews' prophetic pronouncements, he dismisses the relevance of prophecy by linking it to their fantastical biblical stories: 'Un prophète du voisinage veut maudire ce peuple, mais son ânesse s'y oppose avec un ange.' And he goes further, conflating prophecy with manipulation, self-advancement and greed: 'ces prophètes étaient [...] des gens qui

³⁸⁸ *Sermon des cinquante*, p.441, p.442, p.440, p.441.

³⁸⁹ *Sermon des cinquante*, p.446.

se mêlaient de deviner pour gagner quelque chose.³⁹⁰

While the message delivered in this text follows the pattern Voltaire sets out elsewhere, namely a fiercely presented argument against what he displays as the perverse and untrustworthy Jewish (and Christian) actions recounted in the scriptures, an argument intended to expose behaviour that he finds deplorable, I find that here the tone suggests a greater lack of control than that apparent in later satirical works. Although its themes occur elsewhere, in this case the passionate way Voltaire presents them indicates the presence at this time of an especially bitter personal antagonism on his part towards the Jews. The *Sermon des cinquante* evidences a lack of control that might cause us to interpret it according to Bayard's description of 'failed works'. But although this text is frequently dismissed as a vitriolic deist tract, for our purposes it is particularly significant for the way it exposes Voltaire's difficulty in overcoming his personal prejudices.

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'Juifs'

As in the *Sermon des cinquante*, in 'Juifs' Voltaire postulates the seditiousness of the Jews by reintroducing the figure of Rahab, the betrayer of her own people (1756). Through this manœuvre he is able to present a historical example of an untrustworthy nature; he portrays their dependence on acts of falsity as something that endures into modern times. On this occasion, he performs a two-way movement that suggests a lasting, negative Jewish essence; discovering no essence in chosenness, Voltaire now endeavours to find it in the Jews' morality or lack of morality. So, just as in his letter regarding Salomon Levi he lifts characteristics of the biblical patriarchs into his representation of contemporary Jews (lying, deceiving, thieving), he now reverses this action and attributes to Jews of the past involvement in activities practised by those of the contemporary age. In this instance, Voltaire's manipulative erasing of the distinctions between the Jews of different times and places points to a link purposely constructed to enforce his message of a persistent Jewish immorality. The separation he marks elsewhere between history and myth is now glossed

³⁹⁰ *Sermon des cinquante*, p.446, p.447.

over; here he needs to create a connection between biblical and contemporary Jews in order to give force to his representation of 'Jewishness'. So, when writing about the Babylonian Exile, he contends: 'Il paraît que les Juifs [...] s'adonnèrent aux métiers de courtiers, de changeurs, et de fripiers; par là ils se rendirent nécessaires, comme ils le sont encore, et ils s'enrichirent' (1756). Beside the Jewish 'interest' in children, he discovers a Jewish interest in wealth and a permanent, historically based involvement in money-making enterprises. To emphasize this, he places their supposed avarice above even their religious fervour; of the failure of rich Jews remaining in Babylon after the exile to contribute to the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the temple, he proposes: 'c'est une preuve [...] que les Juifs, qui aimaient leur temple, aimaient encore plus leur argent comptant' (1756). He then extends this representation to include that other figure of the Jews, a lack of originality, whereby they are seen as mere counterfeiters of the ideas and talents of others. We note that these negative citations all belong to the same early section of 'Juifs', a situation that supports our theory that these stereotypically critical views are also representative of that period of crisis and unmoderated writing that we are seeking to define.³⁹¹

However, in the third section of 'Juifs', taken from the private papers, there is a much more compassionate portrayal of the Jews. Voltaire describes them as 'réduits à courir de terres en terres, de mers en mers, pour gagner leur vie' (undated); he shows them denied occupations and material possessions wherever they go. Thus he dismantles the negative representation of a voluntary Jewish wandering and non-belonging, and replaces these figures by one of their unwanted and uncalled-for victimization. Voltaire then continues: 'Le commerce, profession longtemps méprisée par la plupart des peuples de l'Europe, fut leur unique ressource dans [l]es siècles barbares; et comme ils s'y enrichirent nécessairement, on les traita d'infâmes usuriers.' He shows the negative causality of that commerce which has offered them their only chance of surviving in the world; their involvement in this has given the people of Europe an excuse to deny them citizenship. And he goes further: 'L'invention admirable des lettres de change sortit du sein du désespoir, et pour lors seulement le commerce put éluder la violence et se maintenir par tout le monde' (undated). The practices of usury, so

³⁹¹ 'Juifs', p.513, p.516, p.518.

often described in terms that indicate a Jewish vice, here become the responsibility of the Christians who have brought those practices into existence.³⁹²

This passage brings together all the sympathetic elements of Voltaire's Jewish discourse; the Jews are 'obliged' to wander, 'declared incapable' of certain employment, denied all occupation other than that despised by most people, then blamed for their success and tortured for their profits. He thus adds a new dimension to his previous arguments relating to Jewishness: their identity defined by their tendency to wander, their outsider nature, and their occupations, has in fact been forced on them by the activities of others, just as 'infamous markers' have been imposed on them to make their difference visible. The Christians have availed themselves of their services even while persecuting them, and this persecution has ensured that they remain for ever locked in their position of subservience, abjection and obedience. In this way, the stereotypical criticism is turned on its head; here Jewishness becomes not an indictment of the real Jews, but an indictment of the Christians.

Foregrounding Christian hypocrisy and injustice, Voltaire exposes the falsity of their accusations against the Jews: 'on les mettait en prison, on les pillait, on les vendait, on les accusait de magie, de sacrifier des enfants, d'empoisonner les fontaines; on les chassait du royaume, on les y laissait rentrer pour de l'argent' (undated). In this case, every such accusation is reduced to a figure of avarice, not among the Jews, but among the Christians, and the charges of sorcery, like those of human sacrifice, are revealed as fantasies that have been spread by Christian calumny. Adding to his argument, he re-emphasizes the way that the Church has slanderously contrived to interpret the Jews' wandering existence as a punishment for their non-recognition of Christ as the Messiah.³⁹³

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Essai sur les mœurs and La Philosophie de l'histoire

In the *Essai sur les mœurs*, Voltaire contends that the Jews became rich and 'necessary' by performing their role 'de courtiers, comme ils en ont servi partout'

³⁹² 'Juifs', pp.524-26.

³⁹³ 'Juifs', p.525.

(1756), a figure made more concrete in this instance by being placed in the historical framework of fifteenth-century Spain. He writes that by the time of Ferdinand and Isabella 'cette nation étrangère si odieuse et si nécessaire' (1756) had by commerce and usury drawn to itself all the country's wealth; it had become 'pernicieuse par ses profits sur les Espagnols' (1756). Emphasizing a historical continuity dating from ancient times, he claims that during the Middle Ages the Jews 'gardèrent tous leurs usages sociables', and succumbed to avarice, 'se faisant de l'usure un devoir sacré' (1761). In this instance, Voltaire's figure acts in a reverse mode; he gives to the social activity a quasi-religious purpose.³⁹⁴

But, as in 'Juifs', on occasion Voltaire softens his criticism of the Jews by reiterating that the contemporary Jewish involvement in their financial activities has been the result of the restrictions placed on them by Christian society, a state of affairs similar to that in which the much praised Quakers find themselves; both groups are restrained by 'la nécessité de gagner de l'argent par le commerce' (1734).³⁹⁵ This figure, that represents man's choice of livelihood as dictated by a necessity that has been forced on him, remains a constant one throughout Voltaire's writing. At the end of his life, he states that under the Roman Empire the Jews, unable to sacrifice to the gods of Rome, were obliged to become involved in business and 'forced to enrich themselves' (1777).³⁹⁶ Ironically he sets out the tension that lies at the heart of the Jewish practices, the paradox that underpins the Jews' existence: 'En un mot, ils furent partout usuriers, selon le privilège et la bénédiction de leur loi, et partout en horreur par la même raison' (1761).³⁹⁷ Again he shows the way trade has developed in answer to Jewish needs, bringing them the very wealth that has then earned them the jealousy of those who first imposed the restrictions. But Voltaire also introduces a further element into his argument. When we compare his separate representations of the marginalized Jews and Quakers, it appears that his concern is not so much for the occupation itself as for the manner in which that occupation is carried out. While in his commercial dealings the English Quaker 'avait su mettre des bornes à sa fortune et à ses désirs' (1734), in the Jews' financial activities Voltaire perceives the

³⁹⁴ *Essai sur les mœurs*, II, 160, 159, 160, 164.

³⁹⁵ *Lettres philosophiques*, I, 51.

³⁹⁶ *Histoire de l'établissement du christianisme*, p.81.

³⁹⁷ *Essai sur les mœurs*, II, 163.

presence of greed; he alleges that the Jews' so-called 'falsity' 'ne contribua pas peu à leur disgrâce' (1756) – here he renders them partly responsible for the treatment that they have received.³⁹⁸ Commercial exchange may often be useful and profitable to society, but it should not be driven by personal avarice or ambition, a contention that might have had particular resonance for Voltaire himself following his unfortunate, if not shameful, financial dealings in Berlin in 1750-51 with the Jewish banker Hirschel – an episode described by Frederick II as one involving 'un fripon qui veut tromper un filou'. Yet, even in this case where he sees a need for the Jews to improve their behaviour, because their actions lack brutality, he advocates that they deserve to be treated with tolerance.³⁹⁹

While we may agree with Pomeau's suggestion that the writer's satirical allusions to Jewish usury in biblical times could be drawn from his literal reading of Deuteronomy XXIII, a further explanation for this and other similarly negative portrayals of the Jews might be found by reference to what Voltaire writes about other groups in the *Essai sur les mœurs*.⁴⁰⁰ Referring to the allegation of murder by Louis XI of the duc de Berry (1472), he comments: 'L'histoire ne doit point l'en accuser sans preuves; mais elle doit le plaindre d'avoir mérité qu'on l'en soupçonnât' (1756).⁴⁰¹ Even when proof of certain practices is missing, people are often accused of certain behaviour on the grounds of their other attested actions. Accordingly, individuals frequently deserve their reputations or are responsible for the blame attributed to them. This paradigm gives Voltaire an additional excuse for claiming the involvement of the ancient Jews in those monetary activities practised by their modern-day heirs. In this particular instance, in order to define Jewishness, he manipulatively conflates the mythical and the historical so as once more to create a two-way movement, one that enables him to blame both ancient and modern Jews for the faults of the other. But here his indictment again rests on presumed evidence of a Jewish existence that is redeemable, not on an unchangeable essence.

In *La Philosophie de l'histoire*, Voltaire re-adopts a stereotypically suggestive language that adds to the negative representation of Jewish morality. In a passage

³⁹⁸ *Lettres philosophiques*, I, 1; *Essai sur les mœurs*, II, 160.

³⁹⁹ D4358 to his sister, Sophia Friderika Wilhelmina, Margrave of Baireuth (22 January 1751).

⁴⁰⁰ *Essai sur les mœurs* (1990), II, 63 note.

⁴⁰¹ *Essai sur les mœurs*, II, 118.

that repeats the thinking of *Dieu et les hommes*, he shows the Jews as having plagiarized everything from others, even those customs, rites and beliefs that he constantly ridicules and despises:

Les Juifs mêmes, malgré leur horreur pour le reste des hommes, qui s'accrut avec le temps, imitèrent la circoncision des Arabes et des Egyptiens, s'attachèrent comme ces derniers, à la distinction des viandes, prirent d'eux les ablutions, les processions, les danses sacrées, le bouc Hazazel, la vache rousse. (1765)⁴⁰²

Moreover, he again brings together the Gypsies, the Jews and the 'dregs' of the world, not just in terms of wandering, but also in terms that allege a thieving nature. Drawing on this contemporary fantasy of the 'cheating', 'deceitful' Jew, he readopts a highly prejudiced metaphorical discourse to describe both the manipulative biblical texts and the people who hold them sacred: 'ils mirent en œuvre de fausses médailles, de fausse inscriptions' (1756).⁴⁰³ Later expanding this figure, he writes: 'C'est ainsi que de tout temps ils avaient falsifié leur tradition par des fables' (1761),⁴⁰⁴ a comment to which he adds: 'de tout temps les Juifs ont défiguré la vérité par des fables absurdes' (1769).⁴⁰⁵ The repeated attention that he gives to this passage over some thirteen years, the continual fine-tuning of his comments, demonstrates Voltaire's constant concern to create a representation of all-pervading falsity within the Judaic tradition. By his implied reference to the despised trades and other practices reputed as scurrilous, he brings the religious on to the same level as the social. This manoeuvre again carries Voltaire's attack over into those two areas of the spiritual and the practical: Judaism fails on both counts, presenting truths that are neither divinely inspired nor conducive to responsible human behaviour. These figures of falsity and deception reinforce the message that Voltaire intends to drive home, namely, the absence of a universal morality at the heart of Judaism. While the Jews as human beings understand the just and the unjust, the allegedly mythical people of the Bible (and those who revere their

⁴⁰² *La Philosophie de l'histoire*, pp.102-03

⁴⁰³ *Essai sur les mœurs*, II, 160.

⁴⁰⁴ *Essai sur les mœurs* (1990), II, 960, note to page 58; in this passage Pomeau makes other amendments to the Moland edition.

⁴⁰⁵ *Essai sur les mœurs*, II, 160.

teachings) reject the moralities that the universal *lois fondamentales* dictate.

In this text too, Voltaire connects the Jews with sorcery and magic, and so while he writes that magic has always existed, practised by all ignorant peoples, he represents it as a particular métier of the Jews ‘dès qu’ils furent répandus dans le monde’ (1765). According to Fenichel, the stereotype of a supposed Jewish involvement with magic results from the ‘antisemitic’ fantasy that the Jews believe themselves ‘magically superior’ through their participation in the power of God, and Voltaire makes his own particular use of this figure in order to carry further his ridicule of the biblical texts; he mockingly repeats the stories of Moses who pronounced the name of Jehovah ‘d’une manière si efficace à l’oreille du roi d’Egypte Phara Nekefre, que ce roi en mourut sur-le-champ’, and of the ‘pythonisse d’Endor, qui évoqua l’ombre de Samuel’ (1765).⁴⁰⁶ In his correspondence Voltaire attacks the books of Maccabees in which such magical stories appear, stating that ‘l’histoire y est falsifiée à chaque page’. Yet these scriptures (treated as apocryphal by the Protestants) he then shows to be taken from other neighbouring peoples who believed in magic: they did not belong to the Jews’ own books of law – an acknowledgement that again removes the charge of a foolish Jewish particularity. Voltaire reinscribes the Jews in the universal when he declares: ‘Enfin, la Pythonisse était une étrangère.’ (11 October 1763) The way he plays with his interpretations of such figures, alternatively creating their connection with or separation from the Jews, reveals the manner in which he manipulates his discourse according to his purpose of the moment.⁴⁰⁷ But, for him, even this mockery is still not destructive enough, and so he takes the magical figure further, uniting it with one denoting bestiality:

Le sabbat des sorciers en est une preuve parlante; et le bouc avec lequel les sorcières étaient supposées s’accoupler, vient de cet ancien commerce que les Juifs eurent avec les boucs dans le désert, ce qui leur est reproché dans le *Lévitique* (chap. 17). (1765)⁴⁰⁸

At the same time, Voltaire chooses to bring the figure of the magical into a

⁴⁰⁶ *La Philosophie de l’histoire*, p.209.

⁴⁰⁷ D11453 to the Marquis d’Argence.

⁴⁰⁸ *La Philosophie de l’histoire*, p.209.

more historical time frame, and he writes that in ancient Rome 'il n'y a guère eu parmi nous de procès criminels de sorciers sans qu'on y ait impliqué quelque juif'. He then comments that those Jews 'qui ne pouvaient devenir de riches courtiers faisaient de prophéties ou des philtres', and this broadens the argument by bringing together the two elements of greed and of victimhood, thus reintroducing the dual issue of responsibility and rights. According to Voltaire, on one hand, the desire for greater material benefits has encouraged the Jews to engage in deceptive practices in which they themselves possibly do not believe, and, on the other, because they have been subjected to a discrimination that has forced them to choose to follow despised activities, they suffer further discrimination. The ignorance that allows for such beliefs or actions has not just caused deception and suffering in those who witness it, but also to those who practise it, and so 'des milliers de misérables assez insensés pour se croire sorciers' have been burned at the stake by 'des juges assez imbéciles et assez barbares pour les condamner aux flammes' (1765). The tone here concentrates on both the foolishness of supposed Jewish tradition, and the destructive foolishness of humanity in general.⁴⁰⁹

In the *Essai sur les mœurs*, Voltaire reconsiders the question of the Jews' victimhood as the result of false blame. He indicts the 'popular accusations' that have been unjustly levelled at them, and the social restrictions to which they have been subject (1761). Seen as the perpetrators of a 'tyrannie sourde', the spoilers of the nation, 'on prit enfin la parti de les chasser et de les dépouiller' (1756). Revealing the hypocrisy behind the treatment that they have suffered, Voltaire writes: 'Ils furent chassés de presque toutes les villes de l'Europe chrétienne en divers temps, mais presque toujours rappelés' (1761). Objects of both jealousy and discrimination because of their success in their financial dealings, the Jews have been accepted or rejected according to others' current needs. This thinking marks his condemnation of the savage and immoral pragmatism shown by the Spanish at the end of the fifteenth century:

On prit enfin le parti de les chasser et de les dépouiller. On ne leur donna que six mois pour vendre leurs effets, qu'ils furent obligés de vendre au plus bas prix. [...] Les uns se retirèrent en Afrique, les autres en Portugal et en France; plusieurs revinrent feignant de s'être fait

⁴⁰⁹ *La Philosophie de l'histoire*, p.209, p.210.

chrétiens. On les avait chassés pour s'emparer de leurs richesses, on les reçut parce qu'ils en rapportaient.

(1756)⁴¹⁰

Such hypocritical actions on the part of the Christians have caused the Jews to resort to similar acts of falsity, the feigning of conversion to ensure their survival. The notion of an immoral causality is now reversed: no longer Jewish, it has become Christian.

* * *

La Pucelle

In *La Pucelle* Voltaire again attacks the magical aspect of religion, scorning: 'Ce vieil instinct qui fait croire aux prodiges' (1730-62). To emphasize this element in ancient Jewish teaching, he suggests its negative religious causality for the Christian followers. Thus he portrays the friar, Grisbourdon, 'grand clerc en la sorcellerie', in these terms:

Savant dans l'art en Egypte sacré,
 Dans ce grand art cultivé chez les mages,
 Chez les Hébreux, chez les antiques sages,
 De nos savants dans nos jours ignoré.

(1730-62)

Voltaire then traces the Christian's inheritance of the Jewish magical tradition:

Le moine gris possédait le bâton
 Du bon Jacob, l'anneau de Salomon,
 Sa *Clavicule* et la verge enchantée
 Des conseillers sorciers de pharaon,
 Et le balai sur qui parut montée
 Du preux Saül la sorcière édentée,
 Quand dans Endor à ce prince imprudent
 Elle fit voir l'âme d'un revenant.

(1730-62)

⁴¹⁰ *Essai sur les mœurs*, II, 162, 159, 163, 159-60.

But Voltaire also lifts the figure of the sorcerer into the modern world. The old woman, the companion of 'the Jew', 'prédit la pluie et le beau temps, / [...] guérit les blessures légères / Avec de l'huile et de saintes prières' (1755-62). The passage intentionally confounds: sorcery unites the religious and the secular, the Christian and 'the Jew'. And continuing to attack all instances of deception, in this poem Voltaire sets out to show the unforeseen morally destructive results that such behaviour can bring about; 'demonstrating' how the Jewish religion itself was founded on an act of falsity, the serpent's deceit and hypocrisy, he expounds the idea that this brought about humanity's fall from grace – a figure that he mockingly parodies in *Le Taureau blanc* (1773).⁴¹¹

Much of Voltaire's emphasis in *La Pucelle* is given to condemning the contradiction that he finds present in the Jewish tradition: the unjust rewarding of acts of immorality. For him the Jewish acceptance of non-retribution accorded to sinners, and the unfair punishment of later generations, marks an essential lack of reason at the heart of the Jewish faith. Among the Christians, the lecherous, hypocritical, 'incontinent' 'père au grand cordon', Grisbourdon, who seeks by deflowering Jeanne 'to serve' his country, his Church and himself, is sent to Hell, the 'digne séjour de ces esprits pervers' (1730-62); 'just Heaven', punishes the knight Chandos for his violations, his 'impiety, blasphemy, impenitence' (1730-62); and the 'disloyal soul' of the unrepentent 'aumonier inhumain' 'Alla grossier la cohorte infernale' (1730-62).⁴¹² But, in contrast, in the Jews' 'fabled' accounts of Judith's 'saintly perfidy' (1730-62), Aod's murder of Eglon 'au nom de Dieu', and Samuel's 'brave' butchery of Agag by his 'main divine' (1755-62), Voltaire identifies an absence of such spiritual retribution.⁴¹³ Instead, in its place he reintroduces his figure of the Jews' alternative and continuous punishment in this world: God has left 'son peuple en esclavage' (1755-62). This figure, by foregrounding the absence of personal retribution and the absence of individual responsibility for crimes, strengthens Voltaire's charge against the Jewish religion. In his eyes Judaism fails in its essential role to act as a brake to the worst

⁴¹¹ *La Pucelle*, IV, 67, p.321; II, 86-89, p.280; IV, 540-47, p.341; VIII, 392-94, p.403.

⁴¹² *La Pucelle*, II, 131, p.282; II, 101, p.281; V, 28, p.346; XIV, 196, 200, p.490; XII, 116, p.452; XII, 142, p.453.

⁴¹³ *La Pucelle*, II, 223, p.286; XVI, 130-31, 132, pp.509-10.

of human behaviour: it lacks *la morale*. As indicated when he asks of the 'divine Agnès' 'quelle erreur est la vôtre / De vous punir pour le péché d'un autre?' (1730-62), he indicts the unfairness of any system which punishes a victim for the sins of another.⁴¹⁴

Further figures that are more openly anti-Jewish appear in *La Pucelle*, again drawing on the stereotypical representations of deception, unoriginality, untrustworthiness and theft. With an obvious play on words, Voltaire speaks of 'le peuple fidèle / De ses patrons emportant la vaisselle / Et par le vol méritant son bonheur' (1755-62): he questions the notion of 'fidelity', and openly links reward or happiness to wrongdoing. He also compares the monk Bonifoux's vision to the prophetic dream 'De ce Jacob, heureux par un mensonge, / Patte-pelu dont l'esprit lucratif / Avait vendu ses lentilles en Juif' (1730-62).⁴¹⁵ Voltaire's repeated reference to every-day possessions (crockery, utensils, lentils) serves both to denigrate the sanctity of the biblical texts, and to reduce the Jewish character to one marked by petty pilfering. But the linked figures of avarice and deceit are brought into more contemporary times by his depiction of the 'well-paid' fortune-tellers of Charles VII, and the 'worthy Hebrew' who 'galantly lends' to La Trimouille and Arondel 'Deux mille écus à quarante pour cent / Selon les us de la race bénite, / En Canaan par Moïse conduite' (1755-62). This 'Jew' unites with the old woman to help the two knights on their way, but with an added touch of satire Voltaire later indicates that even this service was performed dishonestly; 'false advice' directs the young men onto the wrong path (1755-62).⁴¹⁶

While Voltaire shows that calumny has led to the perpetuating and propagating of false accusations against the Jews, in *La Pucelle* he condemns all spreading of slander, exclaiming: 'O calomnie! affreux poison des Cours, / Discours malins, faux rapports, médisance, / Serpents maudits' (1730-62). And, in the context of this poem, it is in the figure of Agnès, the naïve sacrificial lamb, the unthinking victim of the machinations of others, that victimhood is most consistently and continuously represented. Her name, like that of Candide, suggests her ingenuousness and open purity, traits that stand in contrast to the manipulative

⁴¹⁴ *La Pucelle*, XVI, 158, p.511; X, 190-91, p.423.

⁴¹⁵ *La Pucelle*, XVI, 123-25, p.509; XIII, 297-99, p.476.

⁴¹⁶ *La Pucelle*, VIII, 422-24, p.404; IX, 32, p.406.

character of Church and society. Voltaire draws her with sympathy, the sinner who sins unintentionally and who has to suffer in silence the abuse of others. In this manner, he links errancy not just with wandering and implied deviancy, but also with innocence, ignorance and unavoidable victimhood.⁴¹⁷

* * *

Candide

Again drawing on contemporary fantasy, in *Candide* Voltaire presents a fictional representation of ‘enduring Jewishness’, portrayed in the highly negative register of uncontrolled behaviour, selfishness, deviousness and immorality; he shows even the enlightened ‘Jew’ to be quick-tempered, lustful and lacking refinement in a way that suggests his otherness. Again creating a link between the contemporary Jews and their biblical past, and suggesting the character’s connection with the latter, Voltaire writes: ‘Cet Issachar était le plus colérique Hébreu qu’on eût vu dans Israël depuis la captivité en Babylone.’ Issachar’s financial success, even though connected to the merchant status that Voltaire so often commends, relates to a scheming financial acumen that links him with certain other Jews in the *conte*. These, like the old woman’s companion in *La Pucelle*, are unnamed money-lenders who carry out their profitable financial negotiations at high rates of exchange. Here Voltaire’s figure uses the procedures of fictional caricature to mark out his separation between respectable and unrespectable commercial practices.⁴¹⁸

While the attack in *Candide* does not openly address the Bible, the critique remains the same as that found in the discursive texts critical of the Jews – the falsity of their claims regarding the sanctity of the holy scriptures, and the perversity of their example to future generations. Candide, wishing to protect Cunégonde from the amorous and lustful advances of the Governor of Buenos Aires, looks to the patriarchs of the Old Testament as a model. This episode could be interpreted as evidence of an attribution of Jewish guilt for the wrongdoings of the Christians, but Voltaire diminishes the importance given to such a perceived

⁴¹⁷ *La Pucelle*, IV, 432-34, p.336.

⁴¹⁸ *Candide*, p.148.

causality by showing how the Bible's pernicious effect is ultimately the responsibility of the person who imitates its practices. The blame for choosing to follow an immoral example in fact rests with whosoever makes that choice, and Voltaire re-emphasizes the connection/separation between blame and responsibility by comparing the actions of the biblical patriarchs and the ingenuous Candide: while Abraham submitted to deceit, pretending that Sarah was his sister, the young protagonist, relying on a natural sense of morality, cannot allow himself to utter such a falsehood, an episode that shows that biblical scripture need not be responsible for a later event. In 'Chaîne des événements' (1764) Voltaire proposes that while all effects have a cause, not all causes need have an effect, and it is to illustrate this that he ridicules Pangloss as the proponent of *optimisme*.⁴¹⁹ Accordingly, he suggests that, just as a writer may not be blamed for unforeseen events of later generations, Judaism, even while having introduced an immoral religious tradition, cannot be held to blame for the deeds of others of another time. Candide's natural understanding of universal morality and his refusal to follow the Bible's negative examples repeats the figure found in *La Pucelle*, where the uneducated Jeanne d'Arc, who has never read *l'histoire*, declares that nonetheless she would be 'd'un courage bien bas / De tuer gens qui ne combattent pas' (1730-62). And Voltaire introduces these episodes in order to achieve two further objectives: first to show the enduring nature of human characteristics and human experience, the faults, merits and temptations of all mankind – that is the mundane commonality uniting contemporary people and those honoured and supposedly historic fathers of Jewish teaching – and second to support his claim of the essential lack of morality at the heart of the biblical Jewish character.⁴²⁰

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Allegations of the 'abominable' and the 'disgusting' in Judaism

To give force to his demolition of the Judaic tradition, Voltaire emphasizes

⁴¹⁹ 'Chaîne des événements', pp.525-26.

⁴²⁰ *La Pucelle*, II, 291-92, p.290.

the brutal and revolting nature of many of the supposed articles of faith. He contends that the proof of these actions may be found in the texts themselves, and he backs up his indictment, commenting that: 'on ne peut juger d'une nation que par ses archives, et par ce qu'elle rapporte d'elle-même' (1764).⁴²¹ The emphasis is now on the intolerable nature of Jewish behaviour in the biblical past. Therefore, again insisting that he is 'holding' to the text, Voltaire claims to have evidence of the appalling actions of the ancient Jews – brutal savagery, human sacrifice and bestial or coprological traditions. Referring to the rites the Jews adopted from others, he declares: 'Ce qu'ils ont ajouté d'eux-mêmes paraît d'une grossièreté et d'une absurdité si révoltante qu'elle excite l'indignation et la pitié' (1766). It is on the 'revolting' accounts of such actions that, he claims, the Jews base the truth of their religion and the chosenness of their people. Voltaire insists that the questioning reader of the scriptures cannot be selective in his interpretation; he must accept all or none of the texts as the true word of God. In this way, he refuses the believer the interpretative literary freedom that he allows himself. While at times Voltaire emphasizes the contradiction between the related events and their impossibility, at others – as Katz suggests – he imposes a factual reading on an obviously metaphorical episode. This latter action allows him to foreground the supposedly abominable and disgusting nature of certain stories so as to undermine faith in the whole religion. Bringing the literalness of the unbeliever to those texts understood symbolically by believers, in his argument Voltaire ignores the symbolic dimension and rests on the *illogicality* of an assumption that an all-good, all-reasoning Creator could have prescribed a savage and irrational ordinance.⁴²²

Voltaire continues to reiterate the distinction between a universal and a particular understanding of *la morale*, the opposition between what benefits all humanity, and the mere adoption of arbitrary conventions and customs. But writing for his European readers, in areas of *the absurd* he at times fuses the two interpretations together, incorporating into his presentation of universal morality elements of the Christian world's understanding, with its emphasis on a particularized notion of purity: in this way he reinforces his mocking defamation

⁴²¹ 'Jephté', p.242.

⁴²² *Examen important*, p.179.

of the biblical Jews. Douglas has investigated the different interpretations given by specific groups to certain actions, and the way these interpretations fit into their own symbolic systems. While these differences may rest on only minor details, our personal 'pollution behaviour is the reaction which condemns any object or idea likely to confuse or contradict cherished classifications'. Douglas shows the importance of such classifications in the Judaic laws of the 'clean' and the 'unclean'. But Voltaire, when viewing such issues, ones that he considers 'absurd', glosses over the particular significance of all such distinctions, and instead portrays his own society's interpretation as the example *par excellence* of the universal. Thus he can better ridicule the biblical texts. However, in contrast, in the field of *the abominable*, his argument rests solely on the universal understanding of morality. Brutal actions against a vulnerable victim or activities that contradict what is generally seen as reasonable human behaviour are represented in terms of their utterly intolerable nature: they require the intolerance of all people.⁴²³

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Sermon des cinquante

In the *Sermon des cinquante*, by reading the scriptures through the *morale universelle*, Voltaire can increase his mocking denigration of the biblical texts and those who hold them sacred: 'L'absurdité dément heureusement ici la barbarie; mais, encore une fois, ce n'est pas ici que j'examine le ridicule et l'impossible; je m'arrête à ce qui est exécration.' Although he considers that a perverse nature is a universal characteristic of mankind, in this case Voltaire wishes to particularize the Jewish people and those who have followed them. His excoriation of the Jews rests on his listing of what he finds in the Bible to be 'les horreurs historiques qui révoltent la nature et le bon sens'. So he contends that 'jamais le sens commun ne fut attaqué avec tant d'indécence et de fureur', and he asks us to see 'sur quels prétextes, sur quels faits, sur quels miracles, sur quelles prédictions, enfin, sur quel fondement est bâtie cette dégoûtante et abominable histoire'. To give added strength to his attack on the morality of the Jews, Voltaire here makes use of a

⁴²³ *Purity and Danger*, p.45.

favourite device; he applies an intentionally close reading, following 'step by step' the 'historical' accounts found in the Bible;⁴²⁴ he adopts that Lockean empirical clarity that, as shown in the *Lettres philosophiques*, depends on a 'pas à pas' development of an argument.⁴²⁵ Even while claiming mockingly to be holding 'respectfully' to the text, by his literal interpretation he is able to deepen his criticism of those who believe the Bible to be God-given and true. To expose the unprecedented extravagances with which the Bible 'teems', he reviles the prostituting and incestuous sexual practices of Lot, he excoriates the allegedly revolting and abominable habits of Ezekiel, and repeats his negative representations of the inhabitants of Sodom, the deceitful prostitute Rahab, the treacherous Aod, and Samuel's butchery of Agag. Voltaire bitterly condemns 'ce tissu de meurtres, de vols, d'assassinats, d'incestes' that have been performed in the name of God, and exclaims: 'Que de crimes commis au nom du Seigneur!'⁴²⁶

* * *

'Juifs'

In 'Juifs' Voltaire again constructs a timeless 'Jewish' character lacking in morality, one that has always been a 'brigand', a 'slave' or 'seditious'. He writes: 'l'esprit séditieux de ce peuple se porta à de nouveaux excès: son caractère en tout temps était d'être cruel, et son sort d'être puni' (1756). While the figure of brutality is represented in terms of their past, their position as an object of universal dislike and discrimination persists into the present. He then goes further and accuses the ancient Jews of following a law of the savages, claiming that, according to his literal reading of the Bible, they accepted or encouraged bestiality, so-called 'fornication' and human sacrifice, sexual, social or religious practices that he despises, mocks or bitterly condemns. In his highly satirical second section, while feigning to accept the divine nature of Jewish law, Voltaire gives an over-literal biblical interpretation, a hyperbolically caricatural procedure of his most intense mockery. He claims that this provides evidence of the 'bizarre'

⁴²⁴ *Sermon des cinquante*, p.442, p.439, p.447, p.444, p.439.

⁴²⁵ *Lettres philosophiques*, I, 169.

⁴²⁶ *Sermon des cinquante*, p.444, p.442.

practices of the ancient Jews: copulations and supposed offerings, and trials and sacrifices which 'ne sont que des opérations de bouchers en cérémonie' (undated). He continues to refer to what he calls the Jews' 'disgusting practices' until the last decade of his life; again claiming to be holding to the text, in the 'Réponse à quelques objections' he writes:

Vous perdez tout d'un coup cinq belles villes que le Seigneur vous destinait au bout du lac de Sodome, et cela pour un attentat inconcevable contre la pudeur de deux anges. En vérité, c'est bien pis que ce dont on accuse vos mères avec les boucs.

Sarcastically professing his sympathy for the Jewish people, he adds: 'Comment n'aurais-je pas la plus grande pitié pour vous quand je vois le meurtre, la sodomie, la bestialité, constatés chez vos ancêtres' (1771).⁴²⁷

While on the one hand Voltaire denies the truth of the scriptures, on the other he continues to demolish Jewish claims of innocence of their supposed crimes, asking why a law against bestiality was deemed necessary when the practice did not exist, why the putting to death of victims promised to God might not be considered as human sacrifice. He questions how the Jews might explain the violence perpetrated on the Midianites, the savage treatment of the young women, or Samuel's slaughter of Agag. He concludes: 'Ou renoncez à vos livres, [...] ou avouez que vos pères ont offert à Dieu des fleuves de sang humain, plus que n'a jamais fait aucun peuple du monde' (1771). For Voltaire, here the choice is a simple one: either Jewish history and teachings are savage and immoral, or they are false. The heavy sarcasm in this fourth section of 'Juifs', therefore, returns to that much favoured device of a double-pronged attack, one levelled first against Judaism's unquestioning faith in the biblical stories, and then against its 'impossible' authenticity. He sets out to destroy the Bible's claims to truth by ridiculing the facts and figures of its mythic assertions and by declaring the non-morality of the scriptures. Once more applying a mathematical logicity to enforce his exaggeratedly rational argument, he mockingly scorns the claimed conquests of the biblical Jews over their enemies:

⁴²⁷ 'Juifs', p.518, p.523, p.534.

A l'égard des trente-deux mille pucelages, je lui en souhaite. Notre petit pays est de l'étendue de Madian; il contient environ quatre mille ivrognes, une douzaine de procureurs, deux hommes d'esprit, et quatre mille personnes du beau sexe, qui ne sont pas toutes jolies. Tout cela monte à environ huit mille personnes, supposé que le greffier qui m'a produit ce compte n'ait pas exagéré de moitié, selon la coutume. Vos prêtres et les nôtres auraient peine à trouver dans mon pays trente-deux mille pucelles pour leur usage.

Finally Voltaire returns to his much-used figure of the donkey and with blatant scorn comments satirically: 'A l'égard des soixante et un mille ânes qui furent le prix de vos conquêtes en Madian, c'est assez parler d'ânes' (1771).⁴²⁸

In these later passages of the text, the content readdresses, what are for Voltaire, long-held contentious issues regarding Judaism. But at the same time the tone is tuned more to a blatant mockery based on his perception of the scriptures' irrationality, and less to the vitriolic and impassioned revulsion evidenced in the earlier parts of 'Juifs'. The emphasis in the 1770s rests on terms such as 'inconceivability', 'accusation', *constatation*, and on the various reiterated representations of foolishness, terms which dismantle his earlier attribution to the Jews of a continuous essence of immorality.

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La Pucelle

These sarcastic figures reappear with their biblical overtones in *La Pucelle* where Voltaire opens his poem comparing the courageous virtues of Jeanne d'Arc to other women, but then comments in language that echoes the biblical texts: 'J'aimerais mieux le soir pour mon usage / Une beauté douce comme un mouton.' Continuing the satire, he reveals the problems that face Saint Denis in his search for a virgin in France:

Nos franc-archers, nos officiers, nos princes

Ont dès longtemps dégarni les provinces.

Ils ont tous fait, en dépit de vos saints,

⁴²⁸ 'Juifs', p.536, p.537.

Christian Europe is revealed as following in the tradition of the ancient Jews, using young women for sexual gratification. Similarly, Voltaire introduces into this parody those elements so frequently found in the ancient scriptures – murder, sodomy, adultery, and incest. While feigning to be writing a ‘serious’ work that upholds the tenets of Christian teaching, Voltaire in fact presents it as a travesty that mocks the holy texts of the Jews. The poem, like the Bible, promulgates its authority through the recounting of fables that relate practices considered immoral by its religious followers.⁴²⁹

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Candide

These figures are relevant for our examination of *Candide*. Having been literally booted out of the ‘earthly paradise’ (the delapidated castle of the Baron de Thunder-ten-tronckh), Candide finds himself on the battlefield, surrounded by mutilated corpses. The images Voltaire creates of the injustice perpetrated by war, bodies hacked into pieces, women and children slaughtered without reason, young girls taken as ‘booty’ to satisfy the soldiers’ ‘natural needs’, reiterate the much repeated representations he gives of similar, brutal biblical events. This manoeuvre foregrounds the identical nature of the faults found in both the ancient people of the Bible and the men of the Church, the comparable hypocrisy and immorality of both groups. In this case we can read, therefore, a dual representation of the Christians and their forefathers the Jews. Both, asserting their specious right to uphold their God-given authority through violence, have in fact taken power for themselves solely by an act of sophistry or brutality.

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Essai sur les mœurs and La Philosophie de l'histoire

In a highly satirical passage in *La Philosophie de l'histoire*, Voltaire again

⁴²⁹ *La Pucelle*, I, 12-13, p.258; I, 352-55, p.275.

mocks the alleged customs of the ancient Jews, and scathingly points to how the stories of Ezekiel and others have been related. Condemning the way the figures of Aholah and Aholibah have been used in these accounts, he writes:

Ces expressions nous semblent bien indécentes et bien grossières; elles ne l'étaient point chez les Juifs, elles signifiaient les apostasies de Jérusalem et de Samarie. Ces apostasies étaient représentées très souvent comme une fornication, comme un adultère. Il ne faut pas, encore une fois, juger des mœurs, des usages, des façons de parler anciennes, par les nôtres.

(1765)⁴³⁰

Although in this instance, where his writing appears more controlled than in the *Sermon des cinquante* and the first two sections of 'Juifs', Voltaire acknowledges the non-literal signifying function of the sacred text, still he contrives to reduce the significance of the clearly stated representational intent of the passage; he purposely slants his interpretation in order to persuade his reader and to drive home his indictment of the Bible's immorality and uncivilized nature. His intentional change of emphasis, his minimization of the metaphorical character of the biblical reference, which states that 'Samaria is Aholah, and Jerusalem Aholibah', supports Katz's accusation against him regarding his misrepresentation of the Bible's figurative content. Here, in order to reduce the function of the metaphor, Voltaire emphasizes the indecency and grossness of the discourse, the very failings of which his own texts are often accused. As a result, in this case rather than giving us a demonstration of the way biblical readers manipulatively explain the holy scriptures through a metaphor that does not exist, Voltaire presents us with a further illustration of the fact that he himself is the manipulator.⁴³¹ In certain more objectively constructed texts, such as the *Homélies prononcées à Londres* (1767), he gives full recognition to the place of figure in the biblical writings, but at other times in his hallucinatory works his representation of certain episodes glosses over their metaphorical nature and presents them in highly literal terms. But such an action can be the cause of failure: by introducing an unbalanced and contentious interpretation that is so blatantly subjective,

⁴³⁰ *La Philosophie de l'histoire*, p.241.

⁴³¹ Ezekiel 23, 4, in *The Jerusalem Bible* (USA: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1998).

Voltaire risks provoking a distrust on the part of his audience for all *his* statements that are critical of the Bible. Because his argument appears unfounded, his readers are encouraged to question the rightness or accuracy of all his interpretation. Exaggeration or deceptive reporting of this kind can cause many people to view with scepticism every aspect of his exegesis. Instead of encouraging them to read on, Voltaire's humour may in this context create the reverse effect: a rejection of his works and a refusal to consider all aspects of his philosophical and theological argument. Sarcasm is a dangerous tool that needs to be applied with caution, a quality that Voltaire does not always show.⁴³²

Further issues should however be considered that weigh against that reaction. In our examination of any passage, we have to remember for whom the particular text was intended. The highly controversial and manipulative slant that Voltaire sometimes gives to certain stories (such as those found in the Book of Ezekiel), occurs above all in those texts that he wrote solely for his fellow enlightened. The *Sermon des cinquante*, in particular, was initially meant for circulation among those of his private circle, those who most probably had read his other texts, and/or who were themselves moderately well acquainted with much biblical teaching. Whether or not we today have a deep knowledge of the Bible, we must not allow this to colour our perception of how others of a former period might have received Voltaire's comments. Rather than accusing him of seeking to mislead the uninformed – the very fault for which he condemns the Church – we should remember that in these instances Voltaire was endeavouring to expose in the texts certain 'ludicrous' and 'revolting' features for the edification of those people who already had some understanding of their content, those capable of engaging in reasoned debate.

Furthermore, we might also observe the misunderstanding that Douglas discovers in the way people often read the biblical passages; she shows how we commonly interpret the place given in the Bible to holiness in terms of our understanding of morality. She writes:

Incest and adultery [...] are against holiness, in the simple sense of right order. Morality does not conflict with holiness, but holiness is more a matter of separating that which should be

⁴³² *Homélie prononcées à Londres*, pp.463-64.

separated than of protecting the rights of husbands and brothers.

According to her, the biblical figures are intended to drive home the divine message and are not seen as social ordinances. And she further explains how, in special circumstances, our interpretations of what designates the unclean – ideas on which our symbolic systems are based – can become reversed; for this reason ‘religions often sacralise the very unclean things which have been rejected with abhorrence’.⁴³³ Therefore, in the case of the Jews, while the notion of defilement is founded on a separation between the pure and the impure, holiness can, on occasion, be attained by a humble acceptance of the defiled. As for Ezekiel’s meal (as it appears in the Bible), here the description does not relate to the content of the food, but to the way that it has been prepared; its significance rests on the notion of defilement caused by the use of dung as fuel for the baking of bread, and accordingly it is in this way that we should understand the Bible’s statement: ‘Yahweh, the God of Israel, says this: This is the way the Israelites will have to eat their defiled food, wherever I disperse them among the nations.’⁴³⁴

But Voltaire often takes these various episodes at face value, that is according to the literal sense that he has given them, and so, even while he claims to be avoiding a judgement on the practices of others, he constructs as ‘uncivilized’ the behaviour that marks the scriptures. Now he wishes to condemn, not so much the imagined or pretended indecency itself, but the falseness of the authority that such stories both take from and give to the Judaic tradition as a whole. Satirically he indicates how the divine should be distinguished from the actions of men: ‘Presque tout événement purement humain chez le peuple juif est le comble de l’horreur. Tout ce qui est divin est au-dessus de nos faibles idées’ (1765). But then bringing together in an implied shared indictment these two elements of ancient Jewish identity, the social and the religious, he concludes: ‘l’un et l’autre nous réduisent toujours au silence’ (1765). By denegation, he creates a reversal: by implying that he cannot speak of these things, he brings them more sharply into focus, he gives voice to the very issues that he feigns to deny. He superabundantly

⁴³³ *Purity and Danger*, p.67, p.196.

⁴³⁴ Ezekiel, Chapter 4, verse 13.

speaks what he designates as unspeakable.⁴³⁵

* * *

Charges of Christian hypocrisy, falsehood and deception

While Voltaire's figures relating to the Jews reiterate contemporary fantasies, projecting on to them such negative qualities as falsity and perversity, the figures that he adopts to represent the Christians reverse most of the accepted stereotypes of the times. Contrary to a European self-perception created around a figure of honesty and charity, he portrays Christians in terms of deviousness and deception, figures similar to those he presents regarding the Jews. Apart from his intent to depict both groups with the commonly shared failings of avaricious greed and a desire for personal advancement, Voltaire extends the condemnation by laying particular emphasis on the more serious fault of religious manipulation. Just as he attacks the people of biblical times for supposedly deceiving their followers with false teachings, he vehemently criticizes the Christians for the same deceit and their intentional misleading of their flock. The foundations of the Church are presented as a mere tissue of lies intended to deceive the unenlightened.

C'est une suite non interrompue de faussaires. Ils forgent des lettres de Jésus Christ, ils forgent des lettres de Pilate, [...] des évangiles au nombre de plus de quarante, [...], etc., etc. Vous le savez, monsieur, vous les avez lues, sans doute, ces archives infâmes du mensonge, que vous appelez fraudes pieuses; et vous n'aurez pas l'honnêteté de convenir, au moins devant vos amis, que le trône du pape n'a été établi que sur d'abominables chimères pour le malheur du genre humain? (1767)⁴³⁶

While, according to his representation, in the religious domain this deception goes as far as the pragmatic selecting of the Gospels and the so-called invention of the dogma of the Trinity, in the social it appears in the manipulative use of slander and calumny, and in the intentional perversion of the moralities that Christ's

⁴³⁵ *La Philosophie de l'histoire*, p.225.

⁴³⁶ *Le Dîner du Comte de Boulainvilliers*, pp.376-77.

people proclaim.

Voltaire shows how Christendom has made use of age-old fantasies to denigrate the reputations of those that it wishes to persecute: the false reporting of the alleged activities of others, whether Christian, Muslims or Jews. In the *Histoire de Jenni* (1775) he satirizes the misrepresentation by Catholics of Protestants (the ‘tricking’ of the Spanish people by the Church authorities who have sought to dehumanize their ‘monstrous’ English invaders), in ‘Tolérance’ (1772) he describes the slandering of the followers of Islam, and in the *Relation de la mort du Chevalier de La Barre* (1766) he refers to the calumnies that have been spread against the Jews, calumnies such as their so-called failure to recognize the Messiah, a charge which he repeatedly denies has any value. Desné proposes: ‘Voltaire n’hésite pas à reprendre les stéréotypes chrétiens sur le juif asocial [...] mais jamais il ne reprend les stéréotypes de l’apologétique chrétienne la plus courante sur le peuple déicide, coupables des pires actes sacrilèges et criminels.’⁴³⁷ However, this statement should be considered further in light of the two following comments. First, in the *Examen important de Milord Bolingbroke* Voltaire refers to how ‘les prêtres juifs forcèrent le président Pilate à faire fouetter Jésus, et à le faire pendre à une potence en croix, comme un coquin d’esclave’. This leads Voltaire to question satirically the practicalities of their finding a nail long enough to pierce Jesus’ hands and feet, after which he opines, nonetheless, that ‘les Juifs étaient bien capables de cette abominable atrocité’. In this passage he points to the Jews’ acceptance of the treatment meted out by the Romans to supposed felons, and repeats the Christian scriptures’ message of the priests’ role in calling to their colonial masters for Jesus’ crucifixion. But, although bitterly condemning all violence, Voltaire frequently suggests that the reactions of the Jewish priests to Jesus’ actions might have been understandable, and this now leads him to remark that people of all times who speak out against priests must expect persecution. He therefore draws a link between the actions of Jesus and the Quaker leader, Charles Fox, describing the former as ‘prêchant quelquefois comme lui une bonne morale, et prêchant surtout l’égalité qui flatte tant la canaille’ (1766). By this comparison, Voltaire portrays Jesus solely as the founder

⁴³⁷ *Inventaire Voltaire*, p.766.

of the Christian sect, as an enlightened (if uneducated) man with principles.⁴³⁸ As in so many of his texts, here Voltaire writes out the divine nature of Christ, and by this manoeuvre he suggests that the Jews might be held responsible for willingly participating in an act of violence against a man, but should not be charged with deicide. Second, in relation to Desné's comment, in the *Essai sur les mœurs* Voltaire repeats another popular fantasy levelled against the Jews, even though here the reference has been moved from the Jewish to the Christian field. According to him, Louis XI attempted to stave off his approaching death by drinking children's blood: 'C'était un des excès de l'ignorante médecine de ces temps, médecine introduite par des Juifs' (1761).⁴³⁹ But, in this case, although the accusation remains against the Jews, the main indictment in the passage is against the Christians who are shown as having adopted only the worst of supposedly Jewish practices.

Voltaire establishes another paradoxical link between the Jews and the early Christians. In the *Histoire de l'établissement du christianisme* he unites the two groups, showing how both 'ne pouvant entrer dans les emplois qui exigeaient qu'on sacrifiât aux dieux de Rome, ils s'adonnaient nécessairement au négoce, ils étaient forcés de s'enrichir'; both groups were involved in 'le commerce, le courtage et l'usure' (1777) – the figure is no longer restricted to the Jews alone.⁴⁴⁰ When driven by need, both have engaged in those activities, and then have been equally condemned for their success: the two cases are identical. However, in the contemporary field, the Christians, now grown too proud or even too idle, leave others to perform the roles that they spurn, and then condemn those others for their achievements. Thus the Christians, even while denouncing Jewish practices, seek to benefit from the financial services that the Jews offer. The former's perverted perceptions of the latter are marked by greed, jealousy and calumny; as Rousseau, speaking in the name of Christendom, satirically sums up: 'L'avidité nous donne du zèle, et ils sont trop riches pour n'avoir pas tort.'⁴⁴¹ Moreover, the general hypocrisy that lies behind much of Christian teaching also marks the Church's expansionist activities; actions such as exploration, colonization and

⁴³⁸ *Examen important*, p.221.

⁴³⁹ *Essai sur les mœurs*, II, 120-21.

⁴⁴⁰ *L'histoire de l'établissement du christianisme*, p.81.

⁴⁴¹ *Émile ou de l'éducation*, p.397.

even proselytism in reality have often been little more than excuses to satisfy its monetary greed.

In addition, while professing to be the arbiters of morality, a morality frequently founded on their particular notions of sexual purity, the supposedly virtuous Christians have cheated, deceived, seduced and betrayed their victims. They emphasize the importance of their holy laws and insist on the obedience of the flock, but Voltaire takes up the centuries-old accusation about the Church's supposed involvement in acts of alleged sexual deviation. He constantly indicates the failure of the men of God to live up to their professed standards, and across his texts he repeatedly condemns priests and prelates for their lack of charity, chastity, abstinence and obedience. He underlines the contradiction between what they proclaim and what they do. But his criticism becomes its most severe when he points to the fatal misinterpretation that has sometimes been given to such doctrines. The actions of a supposedly 'charitable' little sect in Denmark, believing it permissible to commit 'un petit mal pour un grand bien', murdered their babies immediately after baptism so that without sin they could go to paradise (1763).⁴⁴² By this historical example, emphasizing as it does the inhuman nature of religious fanaticism which willingly destroys the most innocent, Voltaire condemns the way Christians have interpreted charity itself. And the instability of this interpretation reinforces the instability of the Christian identity that is founded on such interpretation.

So, for Voltaire, Christian behaviour is doubly at fault: for insisting on moralities that are grounded solely on a particular understanding of *la morale*, and for the hypocritical way the leaders themselves have both failed to abide by the attested standards and contrived to conceal that failure. To draw attention to this message, therefore, Voltaire frequently turns to the metaphor of the prostitute, one that allows him to point to the ambivalence present in much of Christian society, an ambivalence at times even more devious than that found in the ancient Jewish texts. Agnès in *La Pucelle* is the King's mistress, but in the eyes of the populace she is seen as a whore; Paquette in *Candide* is alternatively the object of desire or the victim of abuse or rejection. Voltaire thus links these members of contemporary society to the biblical protagonist Rahab and, thereby, creates a

⁴⁴² *Traité sur la tolérance*, p.237.

figure of an enduring but paradoxical tradition, one that portrays the dual nature of woman, both the temptress and the mother of salvation. In the *Examen important de Milord Bolingbroke* he emphasizes this connection:

Et remarquons en passant que cette femme nommée *Rahab la paillarde*, est une des aïeules de ce Juif, dont nous avons depuis fait un dieu, lequel dieu compte encore parmi celles dont il est né l'incestueuse Tamar, l'impudente Ruth, et l'adultère Bethsabée.

(1766: editor's italics)⁴⁴³

Voltaire also uses this dual figure in connection with *La Pucelle's* protagonist, Jeanne d'Arc; the success of her mission depends on her continued virginity even while, as Voltaire sarcastically indicates, the authorities' physical verification of this status is in itself abusive. Moreover, alongside her alleged divinely chosen nature, he constantly reminds us of Jeanne's earthy quality and her readiness to give herself to Dunois, who completes the paradox in being the bastard, the so-called *fil de putain* (1750-62).⁴⁴⁴

But, above all, Voltaire excoriates Christianity's supreme falsity as evidenced by the way that its men of God have presented themselves; to those they have deceived or cheated, they declare themselves to be the sole means to an attainment of absolution and redemption. This brings us to Voltaire's criticism of the sacrament of confession, a doctrinal act that, he contends, in the hands of scheming men of the Church becomes a powerful tool for the further manipulation and intimidation of the unenlightened. He writes: 'Le fanatisme, dans [l]es siècles déplorables, était parvenu à un tel excès que la confession n'était qu'un engagement de plus à consommer leur scélératesse; elle devenait sacrée, par cette raison que la confession est un sacrement' (1766). By designating confession as holy, as a sacrament that is obligatory for the people, the Church authorities can control the actions of their flock. However, more perniciously still, they have not used this merely to restrain their congregations, but in order to encourage them to perform inhuman acts in the name of their religion. Voltaire repeatedly re-emphasizes his indictment: 'La confession [...] est souvent devenue, dans des

⁴⁴³ *Examen important*, p.195.

⁴⁴⁴ *La Pucelle*, XIV, 305, p.493 .

temps de sédition et de trouble, un encouragement au crime même' (1766),⁴⁴⁵ and: 'on s'est servi de la confession, de la communion et de tous les sacrements, pour commettre les crimes les plus horribles' (1763).⁴⁴⁶

In a comparable way, Voltaire criticizes the way Christians have manipulated their interpretation of the story of Genesis. Questioning their logic, he asks why children are born into original sin because of the actions of Adam and Eve, why they are damned 'parce que leur premier père et leur première mère avaient mangé du fruit de leur jardin' (1768).⁴⁴⁷ Adopting false modesty to underline the apparent illogicality of the Christian doctrine, he strengthens his criticism by juxtaposing Adam's disobedience and Cain's murder of Abel: 'Il semble à notre faible raison que Dieu soit injuste en favorisant le fratricide, et en punissant éternellement tous les enfants de ce coupable [Adam], non pas pour expier un fratricide, mais pour une désobéissance qui semble excusable' (1767).⁴⁴⁸ The desire to eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil is understandable, but the killing of another human being is intolerable, and yet in the eyes of Christians the moral judgement is reversed. Voltaire shows how original sin was a later invention of the Church, and states that 'il est indubitable que les Juifs n'avaient jamais entendu parler du péché originel', and that 'aucun des premiers Pères de l'Église n'avança cette cruelle chimère'. But he takes his argument still further, proposing his own explanation for the eventual adoption of this doctrine: 'L'Église fait valoir ce système terrible pour rendre son baptême plus nécessaire' (1768).⁴⁴⁹ While the religious authorities enforce the people's sense of need for a man-made sacrament, in the *Lettres philosophiques* Voltaire ridicules the significance of all such sacraments by the Quaker's reductive metonymic reference to the sprinkling of salty water.⁴⁵⁰ These episodes show how Voltaire, through his interpretation of the Bible's account of the Fall, transfers his accusation from the Jews to the Christians. He focuses on the way the Church authorities have deviously explained the ancient texts in a new manner so as to promote their own importance and power, and, in so doing,

⁴⁴⁵ *Commentaire sur le livre Des délits et des peines*, p.564, p.566.

⁴⁴⁶ *Traité sur la tolérance*, p.184.

⁴⁴⁷ A.B.C., p.336.

⁴⁴⁸ *Homélies prononcées à Londres*, p.467.

⁴⁴⁹ A.B.C., pp.337-38.

⁴⁵⁰ *Lettres philosophiques*, I, 3.

Voltaire demolishes the significance of a causal theory that puts the Jews at the root of subsequent Christian doctrine. The Christians are not just blameworthy for their willing acceptance of Jewish tradition and mythology, but also for the way they have reinterpreted these to their own advantage:

Les prédictions ont été de tout temps un moyen dont on s'est servi pour séduire les simples, et pour enflammer les fanatiques. [...] Si aucune prédiction ne s'accomplit, on les explique, on leur donne un nouveau sens; les enthousiastes l'adoptent, et les imbéciles le croient.

(1735-52)⁴⁵¹

And Voltaire sums up his opinion of all such divinations by answering his own question: 'Mais qui fut celui qui inventa cet art? ce fut le premier fripon qui rencontra un imbécile' (1765).⁴⁵²

While prophecy has become a weapon in the Christians' armoury, Voltaire sets out to mark its separation from the reasoning of thinking people:

Le philosophe n'est point enthousiaste, il ne s'érige point en prophète, il ne se dit point inspiré des dieux. [...] Ceux qui se disent enfants des dieux étaient les pères de l'imposture; et s'ils se servaient du mensonge pour enseigner des vérités, ils étaient indignes de les enseigner; ils n'étaient pas philosophes: ils étaient tout au plus de très prudents menteurs.

He seeks to inspire in his fellow enlightened an enthusiastic determination to improve the lot of mankind, but, for him, such fervour in the men of Christ has become a false mask behind which they have concealed their personal selfish ambitions. In his view, religious hypocrites are 'l'espèce la plus lâche et la plus cruelle de toutes': they are perpetrators of fanaticism, but apathetic to the well-being of others. He declares: 'Être hypocrite? quelle bassesse! mais être hypocrite et méchant, quelle horreur!' (1765).⁴⁵³ And, when reiterating the contradiction evident between the actions and the pronouncements of God's servants in the Church, Voltaire rebuts the charge that he has concentrated on the 'crimes' of the ecclesiastics and passed over in silence those of the secular community. He

⁴⁵¹ *Siècle de Louis XIV*, II, 32.

⁴⁵² *La Philosophie de l'histoire*, p.193.

⁴⁵³ 'Philosophe', *VF*, pp.433-34, p.446.

explains:

C'est que les abominations des prêtres, et surtout des prêtres papistes, font un plus grand contraste avec ce qu'ils enseignent au peuple; c'est qu'ils joignent à la foule de leurs forfaits un crime non moins affreux, s'il est possible, celui de l'hypocrisie. C'est que plus leurs mœurs doivent être pures, plus ils sont coupables. (1766)⁴⁵⁴

Voltaire's point is clear: the immoral acts of such people are most deserving of condemnation, both for their deceitful nature, and for their being carried out by those whose teachings show that they know better.

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Sermon des cinquante

In the *Sermon des cinquante* Voltaire demolishes the standing of the Christian Church through his accusation that it takes authority for Christ's divinity from Old Testament prophecy; this action perpetuates the perversity and falsity of the biblical forefathers. But he questions if future generations will be able to believe 'que le judaïsme et le christianisme se soient appuyés sur de tels fondements, sur ces prophéties'. He links the two groups in their 'coutume vaine et superstitieuse', and, referring to the prophet Isaiah's proclamation of the future birth of the Messiah, he writes: 'Voilà, mes frères, ce que les chrétiens ont détourné en faveur de leur Christ: voilà la prophétie qui établit le christianisme.' Scorning such evidence, Voltaire again endeavours to reveal how the Christian faith is founded on a contrived interpretation. He continues his attack against the Christians by once more showing how they have hypocritically added to Jewish belief, how they have introduced a degree of falsity and manipulation not found in the original texts, actions that expose the illogicality and absurdity of the Christian inheritance:

Chaque devin prédit aux Juifs leur délivrance, quand ils sont captifs; et cette délivrance, c'est, selon les chrétiens, la Jérusalem céleste, et l'Église de nos jours. Tout est prédiction chez les Juifs; mais chez les chrétiens, tout est miracle, et toutes ces prédictions sont des figures de

⁴⁵⁴ *Examen important*, p.349.

* * *

‘Juifs’

In ‘Juifs’ Voltaire portrays how, when the Jews were persuaded, if not forced, to convert to Christianity, the authorities availed themselves of the opportunity to arrange matters to their own advantage. So with extreme deviousness it was decided that since ‘leurs biens venaient pour la plupart de l’usure, la pureté de la morale chrétienne semblait exiger qu’ils en fissent une restitution générale; et c’est ce qui s’exécutait par la confiscation’ (undated).⁴⁵⁶ Voltaire thus reverses the figure of ‘Christian purity’; the representation becomes negated by the implication of specious hypocrisy, and the acts performed in the name of the Church are revealed as mere sophistry. To underline this, he stresses how throughout the Christian world the Jews receive different treatment, depending solely on the political thinking of the countries in which they find themselves: intolerance in France, Spain and Portugal, but tolerance in the prosperous trading countries of England and Holland. In his notebooks Voltaire makes a connection between intolerant religious thinking – such as that found in Catholic countries – and hypocrisy, and concludes: ‘Dans les pays où l’on a liberté de conscience, on est délivré d’un grand fléau. Il n’y a point d’hypocrites’ (1735-50?). In liberal countries the treatment of minorities is not dictated by dogmatic religious belief, but directed by political pragmatism that in turn opens the way to more honest societies.⁴⁵⁷ He draws a similar link in the *Homélies prononcées à Londres*, where he proposes that religious thinkers might learn from those merchants who engage in the free exchange of ideas:

Puissent tous les théologiens de la terre vivre ensemble comme les commerçants, qui, sans examiner dans quel pays ils sont nés, dans quelles pratiques ils ont été nourris, suivent entre eux les règles inviolables de l’équité, de la fidélité, de la confiance réciproque. (1767)⁴⁵⁸

⁴⁵⁵ *Sermon des cinquante*, p.447, p.448.

⁴⁵⁶ ‘Juifs’, p.525.

⁴⁵⁷ ‘Leningrad Notebooks’, p.252.

⁴⁵⁸ *Homélies prononcées à Londres*, p.473.

And in the *Traité sur la tolérance* Voltaire reiterates his conviction of the wide-ranging beneficial results that open-mindedness can bring; in tolerant countries all religious groups ‘vivent en frères [...] et contribuent également au bien de la société’ (1763).⁴⁵⁹ This representation of outsiders as providers of services to Christendom reintroduces the practical element in Voltaire’s argument regarding tolerance. As in the *Lettres philosophiques*, he points to the greater advantages that liberality can bring to a society, and he indicates the foolishness of any group that by intolerance rejects such beneficial commerce. And in the *Avis au public sur les parricides* he takes this into a wider and more philosophical dimension; he emphasizes the need for all religious groups to work together to combat the difficulties faced by every living person.

Le genre humain est semblable à une foule de voyageurs qui se trouvent dans un vaisseau; [...] Hé! qu’importent leurs sectes? Il faut qu’ils travaillent tous à calfuter le vaisseau, et que chacun, en assurant la vie de son voisin pour quelques moments, assure la sienne; mais ils se querellent, et ils périssent. (1766)⁴⁶⁰

For Voltaire, just as the spiritual and the practical together have a role to play in religion, the moral and pragmatic reasons for tolerance are not exclusive one of the other.

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Essai sur les mœurs and La Philosophie de l’histoire

The same figures of Christian moral failure occur in the *Essai sur les mœurs*, where Voltaire describes Ferdinand and Isabella both ‘ayant toujours les mots de religion et la piété à la bouche, et uniquement occupés de leur ambition’ (1756). He mockingly reinforces this image of pious hypocrisy when he writes how Ferdinand was ‘fameux par la religion et la bonne foi dont il parlait sans cesse, et qu’il viola toujours’ (1756). Voltaire sarcastically emphasizes the allegedly ‘très

⁴⁵⁹ *Traité sur la tolérance*, p.147.

⁴⁶⁰ *Avis au public*, p.536.

chrétien' nature of the Catholic ruler and his wife, and then sets their ambitious acts against the so-called charity that the Christians claim for themselves alone. By this manoeuvre he again encourages us to question the very meaning of Christianity, placing the reality of its actions against the hypocritical face that it presents to the world.⁴⁶¹

Voltaire underlines the advantages that societies can gain or lose from their relations with others. While the Moors were essential to the Spanish who 'ne subsistaient que du travail de leurs anciens ennemis' (1756), these same Christians suffered as a result of their persecution of the Jews:

le profit passager que le gouvernement tira de la violence faite à ce peuple usurier, le priva bientôt du revenu certain que les Juifs payaient auparavant au fisc royal. [...] On y remédia autant que l'on put par des bulles. (1756)

And this statement allows Voltaire to move his argument forward, to create a figurative network that progresses from a reference to the monetary practices of the Jews to one introducing the hypocritical actions of the Christians.

Chaque particulier est obligé d'acheter cette bulle [de la Cruzade] pour avoir le droit de manger des œufs et certaines parties des animaux en carême, et les vendredis et samedis de l'année. Tous ceux qui vont à confesse ne peuvent recevoir l'absolution sans montrer cette bulle au prêtre. On inventa encore depuis la *bulle de composition*, en vertu de laquelle il est permis de garder le bien qu'on a volé, pourvu que l'on n'en connaisse pas le maître. De telles superstitions sont bien aussi fortes que celles qu'on reproche aux Hébreux. (1756)

Thus, while Voltaire incorporates the actions of the Jews into the field of the universal, he both lessens his criticism of them and strengthens his indictment of the Christians. This takes the criticism against foolish intolerance to a more serious level that concentrates on demonstrating how, through hypocritical manipulation, falsehood and calumny can open the way to persecution.⁴⁶²

⁴⁶¹ *Essai sur les mœurs*, II, 157, 201.

⁴⁶² *Essai sur les mœurs*, II, 159, 160, 161.

La Pucelle

Taking as *La Pucelle*'s starting point a historical event, the English occupation of fifteenth-century France, Voltaire reveals how the French authorities endeavour to give a righteous pretext to what is in fact a purely political ambition. They represent their aim to expel the foreigners from France in religious terms, as a divine mission directed by Saint Denis. But the religious figures for the most part attest a total disregard for (or non-belief in) the faith that they proclaim. To emphasize further the hypocrisy of their actions, Voltaire creates a striking contrast between the poem's characters; he separates the naïve, but principled, innocents who are unwittingly driven to pursue little understood objectives, and the pragmatic, immoral, and usually materialistic individuals, who act solely in a spirit of selfishness and deviousness. Forcefully introducing the question of the corruption of the men of the Church, Voltaire shows how the king's lapse from Christian virtue is abetted by his morally indulgent confessor, Bonifoux. In mocking terms he describes the latter thus:

[...] un mortel tout pétri d'indulgence,
 Qui doucement fait pencher dans ses mains,
 Du bien, du mal la trompeuse balance,
 Vous mène au ciel par d'aimables chemins,
 Et fait pécher son maître en conscience. (1730-62)

Bonifoux, represented as a Panglossian figure who 'dans les effets voit la cause et l'admire' (1755-62), is shown using the authority of the Old Testament texts to encourage the king to follow the patriarchs' 'vogue' for adultery (1730-62). In this way, Voltaire invests his representation of falsity in the ancient Jews with a figure that portrays the Christians as manipulative. He condemns the Church authorities for their dishonestly selective reading of the Judaic scriptures, for allowing themselves that freedom of interpretation in which he himself engages. But in such cases, for Voltaire, there is a clear distinction between his purpose and

that of the Christian leaders: his own free interpretation of the texts he sees as beneficial to society – it aims to enlighten – whereas that of the Church is detrimental as its intention is to obfuscate. Moreover, he adds to his criticism by now presenting Jewish causality merely as a creation of the Christians, an excuse on their part for the inexcusable. Therefore, with implied reference to errancy or deviancy and a play on the word ‘consolation’, the confessor advises the king: ‘De leurs péchés si vous suiviez la trace, / Si vos beaux ans sont livrés à l’amour, / Consolez-vous’ (1730-62). This allows Voltaire to create a link between the consolation of confession which allows the king to sin ‘en conscience’ and sexual ‘consolation’. This structure reappears when the penitent Agnès is welcomed into the convent. The abbess suggests that she will be able to ‘consoler les filles du Seigneur’ (1730-62), a statement whose full significance is only later understood. Among the inmates of the nunnery, Agnès meets the abbess’s lover, *bachelier* ‘Sœur Besogne’, who proceeds to rape her (1730-62).⁴⁶³

For Voltaire, the sexual violence carried out by men of the Church becomes more repellent because of the particular significance that religion has given to sexual acts. Thus his poem indicts the Church’s teaching on chastity, the incarcerating of young people in religious houses, the imposed sense of guilt in those engaged in loving but illicit relationships. In *La Pucelle* the ridiculing of the Christian moral code is taken to its extreme in the figure of the lovers who, on visiting the shrine of Mary Magdalene, ‘virtuously’ learn to hate one another, a figure of Christian morality that reiterates that of the *Avis au public sur les parricides* where Voltaire describes monks as ‘ennemis du genre humain, ennemis les uns des autres et d’eux-mêmes’ (1766).⁴⁶⁴ And, above all, Voltaire condemns the sophistry of the immoral men of the Church who carry out their seductions promising absolution to the ‘sinners’. Using the figure of the lecherous Franciscan Grisbourdon as a starting point, twice in his poem Voltaire refers to the case of the Jesuit, Girard, who was charged with the crime ‘d’avoir eu de petites privautés avec [...] sa pénitente’ (1730-62). Going still further so as to dismantle Christian doctrine itself, he scorns any idea of absolution received from a man-made ritual.

⁴⁶³ *La Pucelle*, XII, 153-57, pp.453-54; XXI, 261, p.581; XII, 171, p.454, XII, 192-94, p.455; X, 357, p.429; X, 398, p.430.

⁴⁶⁴ *Avis au public*, p.531.

The *scélérat* Martinguerre is described as:

Voleur de jour, voleur de nuit, corsaire,

Mais saintement à la Vierge attaché

Et sans manquer récitant son rosaire

Pour être pur et net de tout péché.

(1755-62)

According to Voltaire, faith supported by physical trappings that have been given divine significance is (at best) nothing but foolish superstition. He mocks the *cuisine de poche*, the missels and the salt, seen as necessary articles by the confessor Bonifoux before he murmurs his benediction in Latin – a language incomprehensible to most of his flock.⁴⁶⁵

* * *

Candide

In *Candide* Voltaire reiterates his scorn of Christian ritual and the claimed efficacy of the sacraments and sacred objects by a further reference to holy water, in this instance used supposedly to revive the young baron after his attack by the *Bulgares*: the patient revives when its saltiness stings his eyes. And Voltaire continues to question the role of the confessor, not just by allusion to the *billets de confession*, but by metaphorically linking sickness and salvation found in the spiritual domain with that found in the physical. Just as the confessor who leads his victim astray can promise redemption, the doctor who visits Candide in Paris worsens the health of the sufferer before offering him a cure. Both these figures suggest an abuse of authority, one that enforces its position of power by first creating a need in the vulnerable for its services.

In this text Voltaire proceeds with his objective of throwing doubt on the Christian idea of charity, and questions the morality that is defined by a particular interpretation of what is right and what is wrong. The first point is brought sharply into focus by the way Voltaire contrasts the protagonist's repeated attempts to help

⁴⁶⁵ *La Pucelle*, II, p.283, note de Voltaire (cf. III, p.308, note de Voltaire); VIII, 336-39, pp.401-02; XVII, p.528, note de Voltaire.

his fellows with the uncaring behaviour of the supposedly 'charitable' Christian preacher. This marks out a separation between doing and saying, between what actually helps mankind and what does not. The second issue, that of morality, is raised by Candide's unwillingness to imitate the ways of his religious forebears, his rejection of the option of lying to advance his own cause, a decision which further separates him from those moral authorities who, while considering themselves to be his superiors, falsely present their own actions and thinking. And, paying particular attention to how the Christian world has used sexual behaviour to explain its moralities, the story then brings this aspect into question by the figures of the 'strange genealogy' of Pangloss' syphilis, the Abbé's exploits in Paris, and the relationship of Paquette and Frère Giroflée. Moreover, the Baron's castle, the so-called 'earthly paradise', is found to be structured on a total absence of those 'moral' qualities which purport to give right to authority. Pangloss and Candide's noble mother have both been involved in so-called illicit affairs, and yet Candide, wishing to follow their example, is evicted from the castle. Voltaire thus reveals how social hierarchy is ungrounded, Christian morality is arbitrary, and equality and justice are lacking.

* * *

The abominable and intolerable elements in Christian behaviour

Whereas, according to Voltaire, the Jews have given example of their abominable character by their reported deeds of the Old Testament, in the case of the Christians the accusation does not rest on allegedly 'disgusting' or brutal events or myths in a fictional past, but on real deeds of the present, actions authorized by those 'abominables chimères' portrayed as holy doctrines, and here pursued 'pour le malheur du genre humain' (1767).⁴⁶⁶ In this instance, his comments reject the idea of the absurd and concentrate solely on the utterly contemptible and intolerable, and so, as the enquiry turns from the allegedly mythical Jewish practices to real Christian actions, the indictments move into a noticeably more serious register. The biblical events themselves are now

⁴⁶⁶ *Le Dîner du Comte de Boulainvilliers*, p.376.

irrelevant, in this case represented as merely metaphorical images, while it is the Church's manipulative and pragmatic interpretation itself that comes under highly critical scrutiny. At the same time, Voltaire's discourse progresses from criticism of a hypocrisy that disguises personal ambition or a desire for other people's admiration, to the denunciation of the falsity that intentionally contrives to create an excuse for personal or universal acts of brutality or intolerance. Voltaire shows the extent of his own fanaticism, his personal missionary drive in the name of tolerance and the rejection of the intolerable

First, he accuses the Christians of savage proselytism, a project often invested with a desire for personal promotion, and he exposes the way that men of the Church have used their religion to explain or give reason to their cruel actions. Second, he denounces the depths to which manipulation has descended. Pointing to the sophistry that seeks to excuse the brutality of the *auto-da-fé* as a so-called redemptive act of faith, in the *Traité sur la tolérance* Voltaire condemns the Inquisitor's claim that his actions were performed for the good of the victims (1763).⁴⁶⁷ In the *Histoire de Jenni* he uses his protagonist to deride the justice of a faith that 'cooks' a people who follow different practices from its own, and the authority which, having burnt someone 'because he is a Jew', then takes all his possessions. With a rhetorical use of bathos that gives force to the comment, Freind sums up that this is 'un très mauvais argument' (1775).⁴⁶⁸

Voltaire shows how arrogance has led the Christians to endeavour to spread their message to all corners of the world: 'Leur opinion était que toute la terre doit être chrétienne.' This marks a profound difference between the Christians and the Jews; the latter 'ne couraient point la terre et les mers pour mépris' (1764).⁴⁶⁹ As Arkush explains, for Voltaire, while Judaism was 'capable of doing only limited harm, Christianity [...] with its elaborate dogmatic theology and its universalistic pretensions, has inevitably inspired its clerical leaders to stir up the worst kinds of trouble'.⁴⁷⁰ Repeatedly interweaving figures of such missionary zeal with those of avaricious exploration or territorial expansion, Voltaire then takes the matter further. He asks whether, when wanting to persuade others of the rightness of

⁴⁶⁷ *Traité sur la tolérance*, p.248.

⁴⁶⁸ *Histoire de Jenni*, p.527.

⁴⁶⁹ 'Tolérance', VF, p.554, p.553.

⁴⁷⁰ 'Voltaire on Judaism and Christianity', p.239.

one's own religion, it would not be better to act 'avec la plus insinuante douceur, et la modération la plus engageante' (1764);⁴⁷¹ he questions the logicity of those who hope to convert others 'en les révoltant continuellement par les calomnies les plus atroces, en les persécutant' (1766).⁴⁷² Creating a further connection between violence and hypocrisy, he points to the negative effects of Christian actions by quoting Archbishop Tillémont's statement: 'La violence peut faire des hypocrites; on ne persuade point quand on fait retentir partout les menaces' (1763).⁴⁷³ And, through the voice of the rabbi, Voltaire exposes the Christian actions as absurd, directed by a total lack of rationality:

O tigres dévots! panthères fanatiques! qui avez un si grand mépris pour votre secte que vous pensez ne la pouvoir soutenir que par des bourreaux, si vous étiez capables de raison je vous interrogerais, je vous demanderais pourquoi vous nous immolez, nous qui sommes les pères de vos pères.

(1761)⁴⁷⁴

The Christians' perceived need to resort to violence in order to promote their faith serves to undermine the authenticity of that very faith itself. Voltaire, therefore, looks for an explanation for the Christians' more brutal antagonism, their obligation to resort to such acts of utter cruelty: he suggests that the anger with which missionaries have responded to the rejection of their teachings stems from their sense of wounded pride. In the *Idées républicaines* he contends that 'c'est l'orgueil seul qui est intolérant', before adding: 'C'est lui qui révolte les esprits, en voulant les forcer à penser comme nous; c'est la source secrète de toutes les divisions' (1768).⁴⁷⁵

While at times Voltaire indicates an ambivalence as to whether or not the Jews were the guilty 'cause' of nefarious 'effects' in the Christian religion, he removes all doubt from the charge of the Christians' willing adoption of their savage inheritance from the Jews. He reviles the way the Church has embraced the brutal Jewish tradition; it has not just accepted the textual accounts of violence, but has

⁴⁷¹ 'Religion', p.486.

⁴⁷² *Avis au public*, p.523.

⁴⁷³ *Traité sur la tolérance*, p.227.

⁴⁷⁴ *Sermon du Rabbin Akib*, p.281.

⁴⁷⁵ *Idées républicaines*, p.432.

perpetrated an equivalent savagery against others, including the very people from whom it has received its teachings. The paradox that this introduces is set out in detail by the rabbi, who says: 'C'est ainsi que, par une contradiction aussi absurde que leur fureur est abominable, ils offrent à Dieu nos makibs (nos psaumes), ils empruntent notre religion même, en nous punissant d'être élevés dans notre religion' (1761).⁴⁷⁶ This repeats the thinking of Voltaire's early notebooks, where he metaphorically sums up the tension with the words: 'When I see Christians cursing Jews methinks I see children beating their fathers' (c.1726).⁴⁷⁷

Voltaire reveals how the most brutal acts become invested with claims of sanctity:

C'est ainsi que ces monstres impitoyables invoquaient le Dieu de la clémence et de la bonté, le Dieu pardonneur, en commettant le crime le plus atroce et le plus barbare, exerçant une cruauté que les démons dans leur rage ne voudraient pas exercer contre les démons leurs confrères. (1761)⁴⁷⁸

His criticism of the Church's manipulative reasoning and spurious pronouncements is not levelled at the Catholics alone, but at any Christian group which makes use of such religious sophistry. So writing to d'Alembert about the latter's article 'Genève', Voltaire attacks the Calvinists, declaring that, to justify Servet's assassination, 'des prêtres veulent canoniser ce crime' (6 December 1757).⁴⁷⁹ Sparing no groups when they deserve condemnation, later he writes again to d'Alembert: 'Fanatiques papistes, fanatiques calvinistes, tous sont pétris de la même m... détrempée de sang corrompu' (12 December 1757).⁴⁸⁰ This statement integrates with his portrayal of most religions as perversions or falsifications of reason and persuasive rhetoric, and as directly hostile to universal morality by dint of their divisiveness. Christians distort reason and paralyse the reasoning powers and moral judgement of the populace, so that those members of the religious institutions who have the advantage can engage with impunity in the savage

⁴⁷⁶ *Sermon de Rabbin Akib*, p.281.

⁴⁷⁷ 'Small Leningrad Notebook', p.51 (written in English in the original text).

⁴⁷⁸ *Sermon de Rabbin Akib*, p.281.

⁴⁷⁹ D7499.

⁴⁸⁰ D7512.

violence that is natural to humanity: there is no comeback because religious belief is used to keep people terrified. To support their teachings, the Christians have resorted to deceit and manipulation, often denying their followers the chance to read and judge things for themselves. But this leads Voltaire to introduce a tension into his argument for enlightenment. While widespread education might be able to bring about a more tolerant society, the manipulative measures of the Catholic Church to keep the people in ignorance – by limiting in the uneducated their knowledge of the scriptures, and by adopting the Latin language that the *canaille* does not understand – presents the reverse face of this figure: the actions of the educated religious authorities expose how knowledge can be abused.

* * *

Sermon des cinquante

In the *Sermon des cinquante*, selectively interpreting the texts to manipulate his reader, Voltaire concentrates on the aspects that he finds most revolting in the Bible, thence dismantling the whole structure of the Church; he reiterates that Christianity gives its support to the ‘abominable’ Judaic tradition because that tradition is the bedrock of the Christian faith. This is a figure that he repeats many years later, when in the *Histoire de Jenni* he presents Warburton’s contention that Moses’ non-reference to the existence of the immortality of the soul might be taken as proof of a divine mission – a claim that in the *Traité sur la tolérance* is described as an abuse of the truth. Freind, the Anglican divine, comments satirically: ‘Cette conclusion absurde fait malheureusement conclure que la secte juive était fausse; les impies en concluent par conséquent que la nôtre, fondée sur la juive, est fausse aussi’ (1775).⁴⁸¹ Voltaire thus reinterprets the Judeo-Christian tension in a way that diminishes the status of the latter. The Christians cannot afford to deny the ‘truths’ of the Old Testament for fear of reducing the status of Christ, and this makes them the vulnerable party and contradicts their self-claimed superiority; the Church is dependent on Judaism, while Judaism is able to exist without Christianity. Voltaire shows that while there may be a mutual need for Jews and Christians in the social world – an exchange of services, a commerce

⁴⁸¹ *Histoire de Jenni*, p.538.

based on usury and usefulness, one that for materialistic reasons trades persecution with non-persecution – in the religious sphere it is the Jews and not the Christians that can stand alone. Thus, in the *Sermon*, he links the example set by the unsavoury stories in the Old Testament to the Christian faith, portraying how actions such as those of Ezekiel are taken as figures ‘de l’Église de Jésus Christ’. These episodes act as preludes to the abominable deeds performed throughout Christendom, where, in the name of faith, ‘dans tous les temps on se bat, on s’égorge, on s’assassine’.⁴⁸²

* * *

‘Juifs’

So moving on from his analysis of the ancient savagery of Judaism, into the barbarism found in the contemporary world of Christianity, Voltaire reaffirms how the Jews and Christians share a common heritage marked by violence and morally repugnant behaviour. In the later section of ‘Juifs’, mockingly addressing the Jews, he carries his derision over to include the Christians:

Comment n’aurais-je pas la plus grande pitié pour vous quand je vois le meurtre, la sodomie, la bestialité, constatés chez vos ancêtres, qui sont nos premiers pères spirituels et nos proches parents selon la chair? Car enfin, si vous descendez de Sem, nous descendons de son frère Japhet; nous sommes évidemment cousins. (1771)

From this he concludes: ‘Vous fûtes des monstres de cruauté et de fanatisme en Palestine, nous l’avons été dans notre Europe’ (1771). But, according to Voltaire, while the ancient Jews carried out their actions in the name of a mistaken religious obedience, the Christians’ activities have been driven solely by their avaricious ambitions. Moreover, he shows the way the latter have hypocritically sought to distance themselves from the reality of their actions, not just by creating false justifications, but also by employing others to commit the atrocities that they wish to perpetrate. Speaking for the Christian world, therefore, Voltaire remarks satirically: ‘Toute la différence est que nos prêtres vous ont fait brûler par des

⁴⁸² *Sermon des cinquante*, p.448, p.452.

laïques, se contentant d'appliquer votre argent à leur profit, et [...] vos prêtres ont toujours immolé les victimes humaines de leurs mains sacrées' (1771). Both acts are intolerable, but the Christians' fault is the greater, not just because they should know better, but because they have embroiled others in those brutal deeds that they have cloaked in hypocrisy.⁴⁸³

* * *

La Pucelle

In *La Pucelle* Voltaire gives us a dramatic example of the depths to which Christian personal ambition or wounded pride may sink. Dorothée's uncle, the Archbishop, not only shows total disregard for the moralities proclaimed by his faith, an adherence to honesty, charity and chastity, but takes his wrongdoing to the ultimate degree; his attempted seduction of his niece is not just a disregard for the bonds of a particularized morality or a violation of avuncular duty, but, more seriously in the eyes of the Church, an act of 'spiritual incest', one whose sinfulness is then propounded by his later hypocritical and savage actions. As Norbert Schlipa points out, 'le prêtre est une autre représentation traditionnelle de l'image du père – "père spirituel" de la plupart des religions révélées';⁴⁸⁴ in the *Dictionnaire philosophique* Voltaire refers to the Abbé in these terms, and in the *Prix de la justice* he explains: 'C'est une espèce de sacrilège dans un homme d'église de coucher avec une fille qu'il a baptisée, ou confirmée, ou confessée' (1777).⁴⁸⁵ In Catholic doctrine all such actions are 'un péché mortel, un sacrilège, un inceste spirituel' (1771), and so accordingly Dorothée describes her uncle's actions as an outrage to nature and to the Church (1730-62).⁴⁸⁶

Repeatedly in his texts, Voltaire indicts the way the Church both creates relational bonds – between penitents and confessors, godchildren and godparents, co-godparents or extended family – and annuls others. As he reveals through historical and fictional figures (Catherine of Aragon in the *Essai sur les mœurs*, the Inquisition's victims in *Candide* and Mlle St. Yves in *L'Ingénu*) such actions

⁴⁸³ 'Juifs', p.534, p.541.

⁴⁸⁴ *La Loi du père et les droits du cœur*, p.79.

⁴⁸⁵ 'Abbé' (1765), p.287; *Prix de la justice*, p.567.

⁴⁸⁶ 'Inceste', p.452 (originally in the *Questions sur l'Encyclopédie*); *La Pucelle*, VII, 158, p.382.

can become the cause of persecution or tragedy. He therefore queries the human and social dimension to moral dictates pronounced on sexual issues, and underlines the pragmatic or particularized nature of religious or ethical ordinances relating to such practices. Questioning the relativity of laws, Voltaire asks whether we should not distinguish 'entre les devoirs universels et les devoirs locaux' (1777).⁴⁸⁷ Just as he suggests a separation between homosexuality and pederasty, he draws a similar distinction between fornication and adultery. In the *Histoire de Jenni* Voltaire presents an alternative argument to that of the established Church; Freind demonstrates how adultery, as an act of theft, the taking of another's possession, is wrong according to universal morality, but 'la fornication entre deux personnes libres' is 'sinful' only according to a particular moral interpretation. More importantly still, Voltaire emphasizes the significant difference between chosen relationships and the abuse of the vulnerable. In *La Pucelle*, through the experiences of Agnès, he reveals his sympathy for unwilling victims; she, when raped by Sœur Besogne, has to accept that: 'Souffrir en paix, soupirer et se taire, / Se résigner est tout ce qu'on peut faire' (1731-35). But while he creates a separation between willing and unwilling physical relationships, the Church unites all such actions as sins. The universal morality relies on mutual consideration or beneficence, but spiritual leaders interpret morality according to their own particular codes, even though (according to Voltaire) it is not their place to designate what is or what is not to be permitted. Their role is to show tolerance.⁴⁸⁸

However, in *La Pucelle* the abuse of power, the miscarriage of justice, goes still further. The Archbishop does not just break the trust given to him by his office, but also exacerbates his fault by the most corrupt form of hypocrisy; against the victim who has refused him, he levels a charge of earlier sexual promiscuity, and condemns her to the *auto-da-fé*. Dorothée, the unwilling recipient of the Archbishop's lust, is found guilty by the Church for her loving extramarital relationship with La Trimouille. But Voltaire, portraying her as the innocent, the accuser as the true sinner, shows that it is the seducer who should

⁴⁸⁷ *Prix de la justice*, p.563.

⁴⁸⁸ *La Pucelle*, X, 416-17, p.431.

‘réparer le mal qu’il a fait, parce que la faiblesse a droit à l’indulgence’ (1766).⁴⁸⁹

Demolishing the prelate’s false presentation of morality, and exposing the contradiction between his actions and his religious pronouncements, Voltaire presents immorality as existing in the Archbishop’s actions alone: his attempted seduction of his niece, and his hypocritical efforts to conceal his own behaviour.

These figures point clearly to Voltaire’s denunciation of all cruelty practised against the vulnerable, in particular in the name of religion. In the figure of the Archbishop, he gives two levels to this indictment: the significance placed on sexual morality, and the way the meaning given to any relationship can itself be manipulated according to the moment. Through his condemnation of the hypocrisy and cruelty of the prelate, Voltaire attacks the very teachings, beliefs and practices of the Catholic Church. While it has set itself up as the arbiter of morality, his aim is to depict the devious, pragmatic or genuine motivations that may lie behind the professed objectives of certain of its authorities; like the Grand Inquisitors in *Candide* and the *Histoire de Jenni*, the Archbishop has his personal reasons for the intimidation or destruction of his victim. These episodes give a human face and reality to the brutality that marks the Inquisition. Condemning the way ceremonial contrives to mask the savagery of the event, Voltaire exposes the real purpose of such trappings: ‘A mesure que les hommes acquièrent plus de lumières, l’appareil devient plus inutile: ce n’est guère que pour le bas peuple qu’il est encore quelquefois nécessaire’ (1738).⁴⁹⁰ In his opinion, such ceremonial is just another device to confuse or deceive the unenlightened.

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Candide

Voltaire constantly re-emphasizes how hypocrisy makes possible the violence that the Christians perpetrate for purposes of power and personal profit. In *Candide*, therefore, a further paradoxical message appears through the militaristic activities of the Jesuit fathers and the contradictory policies carried out by them in the Old World and the New; in the former they act as confessors to the Spanish

⁴⁸⁹ *Commentaire sur le livre Des délits*, p.540.

⁴⁹⁰ *Lettres philosophiques*, Appendix, p.240.

and Portugese kings, in South America they take up arms against them. The Christians pursue their agenda in a spirit of selfish ambition, forging political and religious alliances at will, solely in order to further their own cause. Drawing on the imagery of the Bible, the *conte* relates a litany of war, battles and civil strife, but renders the butchery more telling by the way that the *Bulgares* and *Abares* both sing their *Te Deum* to the same God, the Christians unite with the Muslims to defeat other Christians, compatriots join in combat against each other in civil war. The supposedly religious programme of the Jesuits of South America is nothing but a project of self-enrichment, and with obvious sarcasm Voltaire writes: 'Los Padres y ont tout, et les peuples rien; c'est le chef-d'œuvre de la raison et de la justice'. The claimed charity, generosity and fairness of the Christians is revealed as false and contrived. Displaying their arrogance, the Europeans have travelled the world imposing their faith and politics for reasons of personal gain and unnecessary desires, ever ignoring the universal understanding of moral justice and its fundamental laws.⁴⁹¹

In *Candide* Voltaire metaphorically re-addresses the paradox of European expansion and discovery, the benefits and disadvantages they have brought to both the Old World and the New. Pangloss' sickness 'qui empoisonne la source de la génération, [...] et qui est évidemment l'opposé du grand but de la nature' stands as a metonym for the price paid to provide the new and unnecessary pleasures of Western society, but it also acts as a metaphor for the exploitative intolerance of Christianity as a whole. The figure of disease, previously applied to the Jews, now depicts the Christians, but in a way that emphasizes its more pernicious influence on other people.⁴⁹² In the *Avis au public* Voltaire writes:

La rage du préjugé qui nous porte à croire coupables tous ceux qui ne sont pas de notre avis,
la rage de superstition, de la persécution, de l'inquisition, est une maladie épidémique qui a
régné en divers temps, comme la peste. (1766)⁴⁹³

The effect on the Europeans has been detrimental both morally (by the promotion of greed and brutality), and practically (by the human losses geographical

⁴⁹¹ *Candide*, p.169.

⁴⁹² *Candide*, p.131.

⁴⁹³ *Avis au public*, p.534.

expansion has incurred) – a repetition of Voltaire's concerns regarding the state of certain European populations at the time. But an equally cruel price is paid by those of other parts of the world; the black slave is beaten and mutilated as he works on the sugar plantation, the Oreillons have been brutalized by the Jesuits. Thus Voltaire takes his attack to the heart of what defines the civilized and the uncivilized, the Christian and the unchristian; the colonizers have physically damaged the slave, but they have taken their abuse to lower depths by their undermining of the very moral codes of the native people they seek to conquer. Barbarism is now depicted not as a characteristic essential to the Oreillons, but as a characteristic brought about in them by the supposedly 'civilized' men of God who are themselves barbaric. The brutal intentions of the men of the New World who wish to punish Candide represent the effect of a negative Christian causality, the result of their experiences with their European other.

The *conte* attacks the way the Church acts with selfish pragmatism and, thereby, again questions the Europeans' alleged civilization and superiority: the Inquisitor both persecutes and trades with 'the Jew', the missionaries and merchants embrace the black slave as a 'son of Adam', as a 'brother', but treat him with brutality, and deny him his rights as a human being. But, despite his bitter experiences, the slave holds on to the true meaning of his faith, the people of Eldorado do not know the temptations of greed and acquisitiveness, the Oreillons before committing an act of brutality seek to verify the justice of their actions; these episodes re-enforce Voltaire's condemnation of the way Europeans have mis-represented themselves. He shows how the allegedly 'savage' Oreillons respond to a natural understanding of morality, reconsidering whether or not it is 'chrétien' to cook Candide, a figure that links to Voltaire's bitter criticism of the *auto-da-fé*. He contrasts the Europeans' lack of genuine moral or religious conviction with the principles of those people they encounter in the New World, and exposes again the illogicality whereby the Christians have endeavoured to convert others to their religion of peace, charity and tolerance by engaging in practices that totally contradict those claims.

Essai sur les mœurs and La Philosophie de l'histoire

When indicting the violent hypocrisy of supposedly holy individuals, in the *Essai sur les mœurs* Voltaire again takes the argument from the mythical examples of the ancient Jews, to the lived realities of the Christians. Using as historical paradigms the plots against the Medici and Sforza families, where the murderers took advantage of the Mass to perpetrate their deeds, he shows how even in the most sacred domain falsity and savagery marks Christian practices. Continuing his attack, he then uses another historical starting point, the burning of Savonarola in fifteenth-century Florence. This murderous act, that was performed in the name of the Christian religion, is defined in those terms of absurdity and barbarity so often attributed to the biblical Jews:

Vous regardez en pitié toutes ces scènes d'absurdité et d'horreur; vous ne trouvez rien de pareil ni chez les Romains et les Grecs, ni chez les barbares. C'est le fruit de la plus infâme superstition qui ait jamais abruti les hommes, et du plus mauvais des gouvernements.

(1761)

And, juxtaposing representations of hypocrisy, deception and utter brutality, he expounds the theory that religious doctrine itself was founded on a devious act of falsity or lack of charity: 'l'Inquisition était moins un rempart de la foi qu'un fléau inventé pour troubler les hommes' (1756).⁴⁹⁴ Again Voltaire suggests the presence among the Christians of an intention to harm others; their brutality is not an error, an accident of their religion, but a purposeful desire to abuse their victims. In the *Commentaire sur le livre Des délits et des peines* he writes that where 'la charité manque, la loi est toujours cruelle' (1766).⁴⁹⁵ This statement, in affirming that cruelty and charity are mutually exclusive, sets out the logic of his argument: Christian identity is dismantled because the cruelty of their actions exposes their lack of charity, that very quality on which they claim their identity is founded. In contrast, Voltaire reveals how the Church's true character is driven by deviousness, deceitfulness and brutality, examples of behaviour that is intolerable

⁴⁹⁴ *Essai sur les mœurs*, II, 180, 296.

⁴⁹⁵ *Commentaire sur le livre Des délits*, p.540.

and that renders the Christians deserving of the intolerance of others.

Constantly ensuring that his reader perceives the paradox between the Christians' claims and their actions, Voltaire summarizes:

C'est une chose bien déplorable que la même religion qui ordonne [...] le pardon des injures, ait fait commettre depuis longtemps tant de meurtres, et cela en vertu de cette seule maxime, que quiconque ne pense pas comme nous est réprouvé, et qu'il faut avoir les réprouvés en horreur. (1756)

He repeatedly stresses that, with the one exception of the Quakers, a lack of tolerance is found in all areas of the Christian religion. This intolerance has grown with the increase in their power, so that in turn victims have become victimizers. All groups may forget their peaceable teachings when they find themselves in a position of authority: their misplaced pride can lead to intolerance.

Ce même Jean Calvin avait [...] prêché la tolérance. [...] Mais Jean Calvin changea d'avis dès qu'il se livra à la fureur de sa haine théologique: il demandait la tolérance dont il avait besoin pour lui en France, et il s'armait de l'intolérance à Genève. (1761)⁴⁹⁶

But then restricting the charge, Voltaire reiterates that a savage, confrontational and proselytizing nature is a uniquely Christian characteristic; it is particular to Christ's followers alone. He writes: 'L'opinion n'a guère causé de guerres civiles que chez les chrétiens, car le schisme des Osmanlis et des Persans n'a jamais été qu'une affaire de politique' (1763). He adds that such opinion gave birth to the crusades, even while these were promoted by the popes solely 'pour leur intérêt' (1763). Thus Voltaire collates Christian religious fervour with a characteristic of material greed: once more he replaces the alleged spiritual objective by one of ambition or avarice – the presumed avarice of the Jews is equally to be found in the Christians; for him, in this area the former are worthy 'fathers' of the latter.⁴⁹⁷

Voltaire exposes how the Spanish Inquisition made use of a false legality in order to achieve its materialistic ends, to seize the possessions of the Jews: 'c'est

⁴⁹⁶ *Essai sur les mœurs*, II, 555, 307.

⁴⁹⁷ *Remarques pour servir de supplément*, p.553, p.547.

contre eux principalement que fut établi le tribunal de l'Inquisition, afin qu'au moindre acte de leur religion, on pût juridiquement leur arracher leurs biens et la vie' (1756). Reiterating his accusation against the greedy nature of Christian proselytism, he claims that 'les Européens n'ont fait prêcher leur religion depuis le Chili jusqu'au Japon que pour faire servir les hommes, comme des bêtes de somme, à leur insatiable avarice' (1756). He strengthens his argument by further example, by pointing to the pragmatic ambitions of the Christian missionaries in Japan in the seventeenth century. Following in the footsteps of the trading Portugese, 'la religion chrétienne y est portée à la faveur de ce commerce, et, à la faveur de cette tolérance de toutes les sectes admises si généralement dans l'Asie, elle s'y introduit, elle s'y établit' (1756). Playing on the tolerant nature of their hosts, Christianity became 'la religion dominante, et bientôt l'unique' (1756).⁴⁹⁸ However, Voltaire repeats his East-West reversal, his representation of the one-way commerce that marks the absence of a need in the former for the services of the latter. In the *Traité sur la tolérance*, he writes: 'C'est en vain que le ministre Colbert, sentant le besoin que nous avons des Japonais, qui n'ont nul besoin de nous, tenta d'établir un commerce avec leur empire' (1763).⁴⁹⁹ But Voltaire takes his criticism further; just as in his indictment of the Jews' commercial activities he incorporates a suggestion of a lack of that probity evident among the Quakers, here in the trading practices of the Christians he finds an absence of the charitable qualities claimed by these followers of Christ. Commerce has enriched the Christians, 'mais c'était aux dépens de la chrétienté' (1756).⁵⁰⁰

In the *Essai sur les mœurs* Voltaire reasserts the illogicality of a religion that seeks to bring about conversion by aggression; confiscation of the goods of Jews who turned to Christianity 'n'était pas un sûr moyen de les convertir' (1761). Moreover, by creating distrust between individuals that led to the breakdown of society, the Christian desire to convert others proved itself to be intolerable. Voltaire further envenoms his portrayal of the Church's ambitious and avaricious missionary zeal by once more relating it to disease and pestilence. The Christians have 'infected' the world with their proselytism and 'pour fruit de leurs croisades,

⁴⁹⁸ *Essai sur les mœurs*, II, 160, 376; III, 169.

⁴⁹⁹ *Traité sur la tolérance*, p.151.

⁵⁰⁰ *Essai sur les mœurs*, II, 448.

ne remportèrent enfin que la lèpre' (1756). Like the syphilis attributed to Columbus' explorations, all the Europeans' worldwide ambitions are marked by sickness and death, by effects that are not just detrimental to the victims in the New World, but also harmful to the victimizers themselves. European exploration has been justified by false claims, the supposed territorial 'rights' of those who first sighted 'new' lands, and the satisfaction of needless new tastes and fashions such as cocoa, cochineal, and tobacco. But the falsity of the justifications plumbs still lower depths: while the Christian conquerors spread the accusation that the people of Peru practised human sacrifice, 'ce reproche paraît avoir été imaginé par les vainqueurs pour excuser leur barbarie' (Kehl).⁵⁰¹

Within this figure of proselytism Voltaire also emphasizes the discord that has existed between different religious groups: 'L'ordre de Saint-François haïssait celui de Saint-Dominique' and 'les deux ordres se déchaînèrent l'un contre l'autre' (1756). Therefore, while Europeans have attempted to spread their message to the world, the greatest obstacle to their acceptance by others 'est la différence des opinions qui divisent nos missionnaires' (1761).⁵⁰² But in the *Homélies* Voltaire demolishes the status of the Christians by an even more intensely negative reversal, one that compares them unfavourably to the often deprecated Jews. He writes:

Les Juifs dispersés et malheureux se consolent de leur abjection quand ils nous voient toujours opposés les uns aux autres depuis les premiers jours du christianisme, toujours en guerre ou publique ou secrète, persécutés et persécuteurs, oppresseurs et opprimés; ils sont unis entre eux, et ils rient de nos querelles éternelles. (1767)⁵⁰³

Now it is the Jews who appear united and rational; the Christians, divided and irrational.

While the material in this chapter's last section does much to complete our understanding of Voltaire's attacks on the Jews, and to attenuate our inevitably negative judgement of the very sombre figures found in the earlier sections, it does

⁵⁰¹ *Essai sur les mœurs*, II, 162; I, 425; II, 388.

⁵⁰² *Essai sur les mœurs*, II, 179; I, 196.

⁵⁰³ *Homélies prononcées à Londres*, p.483.

not, of course, lead us to conclude that the attacks on the Jews are fully elucidated by exploring Voltaire's hostility to Christianity. He himself frequently states that the situations of the Christians and the Jews are not comparable; consequently, an attack on the Church, however savage it may be, does not damage the object in the same way as does the equivalent anti-Jewish discourse. Although Voltaire may have needed courage to attack his coreligionaries – since the Church had for centuries aligned itself with, or even constituted, the dominant political power – he did not distinguish himself from the crowd when pouring contempt and condemnation on the long-persecuted Jews, an action that may well (as Pinto remarked) have put them in further danger. Because he attacks the Jews many times without supplying the context of his denunciation of Christians, he places his statements on the same level as the age-old acts of persecution. In a 'performative' reading, therefore, we have to conclude our analysis of the material in this chapter by saying that Voltaire's lucid *statements* about injustice and unfair charges against the Jews are frequently not confirmed by what his discourse against the Jews *enacts*. However, as even this chapter, along with the rest of the thesis, argues, that is not the full story. To get closer to understanding Voltaire's discourse we must always consider the precise context of each of his attacks on the Jews, giving particular attention to his intended reader in every case, and its place in his reflection of tolerance and intolerance as a whole. As I have said earlier, this study does not aim to come down globally on the side of either exoneration or condemnation, but to set out as full a picture as possible for the purpose of scholarly understanding.

Chapter 5 Universal humanity and savage difference

Although humanity is potentially correctable through enlightened reason and its corollary, universal morality, Voltaire portrays our species as essentially violent. Man is brutal and so selfish that even his acts of tolerance are often pragmatic, performed solely for purposes of self-interest, not for reasons of altruistic principle. Even while Voltaire views the progressive improvement of mankind as possible, he acknowledges that by its retrogressive actions the human race repeatedly returns to the barbaric.

By incorporating representations of barbarity into his Jewish and Christian figures, Voltaire's discourse on intolerance questions the role of religion. In the search for tolerance, religion should play its part and, rather than encouraging man's savage behaviour, its chief purpose should be to control it: a major Enlightenment theme. He declares that, although 'on s'est servi dans toute la terre de la religion pour faire le mal, [...] elle est partout instituée pour porter au bien' (1756).⁵⁰⁴ He contends, therefore, that it is better for mankind 'd'être subjugué par toutes les superstitions possibles, pourvu qu'elles ne soient point meurtrières, que de vivre sans religion' (1763), and he asks: 'Quel autre frein pouvait-on donc mettre à la cupidité, aux transgressions secrètes et impunies, que l'idée d'un maître éternel qui nous voit et qui jugera jusqu'à nos plus secrètes pensées?' (1769).⁵⁰⁵ This brings us to the heart of Voltaire's argument relating to atheism. He proposes that for most people a belief in an all-seeing God is essential in order to restrain their natural savage passions. He emphasizes the uncontrollable character of the atheist who is not restrained by fear, and he states that both rich and poor, powerful and weak, when lacking a faith in God, are free to carry out their selfish or execrable actions. He writes: 'les athées sont dangereux. Si le christianisme a des principes exécrables, l'athéisme n'a aucun principe. Des athées peuvent être des brigands sans lois, comme les chrétiens et les mahométans ont été des brigands avec des lois' (1777).⁵⁰⁶ And, worsening the charge against atheists, in the voice of Freind, Voltaire compares their brutal behaviour with the religious

⁵⁰⁴ *Essai sur les mœurs*, III, 182.

⁵⁰⁵ *Traité sur la tolérance*, p.242; *Dieu et les hommes*, p.280.

⁵⁰⁶ *Histoire de l'établissement*, p.113.

fanaticism that drove the actions of men such as Henri IV's murderer: 'Un roi athée est plus dangereux qu'un Ravallac fanatique' (1775).⁵⁰⁷ In the *Homélie prononcées à Londres* he suggests that atheism is more pernicious than religious enthusiasm since, while the atheist will remain constant in his unprincipled behaviour, the religious fanatic may later come to regret his previous brutal or unjust acts carried out in the name of his faith: 'Le premier est un monstre pour toute sa vie, le second n'aura été barbare qu'un moment' (1767).⁵⁰⁸ However, as Voltaire's discourse is ever mobile, in the *Histoire de Jenni* – written at a period when he became particularly concerned about the recent growth of atheism among his fellow *philosophes* – he dismantles this last argument, writing: 'on peut guérir un athée, mais on ne guérit jamais le superstitieux radicalement; l'athée est un homme d'esprit qui se trompe mais qui pense par lui-même, le superstitieux est un sot brutal qui n'a jamais eu que les idées des autres' (1775).⁵⁰⁹ Earlier, in a similar way, he argues that fanaticism is more dangerous than atheism for its *passion sanguinaire*: 'l'athéisme ne s'oppose pas aux crimes, mais le fanatisme les fait commettre.' This, he concludes, is because 'les athées sont pour la plupart des savants hardis et égarés qui raisonnent mal' (1764).⁵¹⁰ In these instances Voltaire presents a total lack of faith as less dangerous than a dogmatic religiosity. But he also introduces a proviso. Marking out a separation between the people who lack reason, and those that are enlightened – above all, the few (like Diderot) who act according to universal morality – he shows that only among the latter group does atheism present no danger. By this argument Voltaire demonstrates how his views relating to atheism fit with his wider supposition regarding the need for individuals to develop their power to think for themselves.

But, expanding the debate, Voltaire then suggests that all intentionally savage acts, even those performed in the name of religion, are in fact the actions of the atheist, because no true believer could commit such a crime in the sight of God; in his barbarous actions, Pope Alexander VI 'insultait la Divinité, dont il se moquait' (1767).⁵¹¹ Voltaire reinforces this figure by further use of historical example, again

⁵⁰⁷ *Histoire de Jenni*, p.573.

⁵⁰⁸ *Homélie prononcées à Londres*, p.438.

⁵⁰⁹ *Histoire de Jenni*, p.574.

⁵¹⁰ 'Athée, athéisme', pp.388-89.

⁵¹¹ *Homélie prononcées à Londres*, p.438.

by reference to the murders of members of both the Medici and Sforza families during the Mass. In the *Essai sur les mœurs* he writes:

Quand on voit un pape, un archevêque, un prêtre, méditer un tel crime, et choisir pour l'exécution le moment où leur Dieu se montre dans le temple, on ne peut douter de l'athéisme qui régnait alors. Certainement s'ils avaient cru que leur Créateur leur apparaissait sous le pain sacré, ils n'auraient osé lui insulter à ce point. (1761)⁵¹²

Fanaticism, performed supposedly in the name of faith, may point not just to the perpetrator's brutality and irrationality, but more seriously to his deceit and hypocrisy, to his lack of pious sincerity. Such fanaticism, enacted in the name of religion, can be carried out only by those who do not think about what they do – they act in blind obedience to a higher temporal authority – or by those who abuse their enlightenment and falsely conceal their true motives and their absence of genuine religious belief.

Although his hypothesis regarding the need for an invented man-made religion has at times caused Voltaire himself to be accused of double-faced cynicism, I would argue that he does not so much call for the creation of an artificial *faith*, but rather points to the need for a set of moral maxims that might benefit society as a whole. Faith cannot be invented in the self, a created set of beliefs can only be imposed on unthinking others; this is the very offence of which he so often accuses the Church. With regard to Christian dogma, he declares: 'Inventer toutes ces choses, extrême friponnerie. Les croire, extrême bêtise. Mettre un Dieu puissant et juste à la place de ces étonnantes farces, extrême sagesse' (1769).⁵¹³ In light of what we know regarding his obvious loathing for hypocrisy and feigned devotion, his earlier statement suggests not so much that a religion should be invented, as that in a world without God there would be a need for the benefits that religious doctrine can bring about. The apparent pragmatism evident in Voltaire's receiving of the sacrament at Easter 1768 and 1769 has allowed many critics to accuse him of hypocrisy. In his letter to d'Argental, Voltaire explains his actions in terms of a paternalistic desire to set a good example to those around

⁵¹² *Essai sur les mœurs*, II, 169.

⁵¹³ *Dieu et les hommes*, p.500.

him: 'J'edifie tous les habitants de mes terres et tous les voisins en communiant' (23 May 1769).⁵¹⁴ However, even while these episodes pose questions, they should be placed in the wider context of the very real threats of religious persecution present at the time. In answer to the doubts raised by his colleagues, in 1769 Voltaire writes separately to d'Argental (9 April) and Madame Denis declaring how by partaking in the Mass he wished to avoid 'disagreeable' consequences for his family, and he makes his remarks more significant by referring to the case of Nicolas Boindre who, when denied absolution, had his body 'jetté à la voirie' (17 April 1769).⁵¹⁵ In addition, we should take into account his designs for his church at Ferney, constructed without obvious Christian symbols. As described by Pomeau: 'Cette église dédiée non à une personne de la Trinité, ni à la Sainte Vierge, ni à un quelconque saint, s'annonce celle d'un théiste.'⁵¹⁶ These points allow us to ask whether Voltaire's participation in the Mass was driven by a social pedagogical desire, or by a wish to protect himself from possible oppression, or again, whether he was merely engaging in a particular rite learnt from childhood in the absence of any other religious practice with which he could fittingly replace it; he frequently refers to the difficulty of shaking off entirely the religious teachings of one's youth, to the way most people find it hard to reject 'une religion sucée avec le lait' (1756).⁵¹⁷ Thus his actions partially suggest a resorting to an act of worship that, as far as possible, has in his own mind been stripped of the dogmatic excrescences that he despises. His personal convictions or doctrinal interpretations of the Mass at the time of taking the sacrament remain private. But, although we can never know the complete answer, the cynical separation that Voltaire repeatedly draws between what he sees as the acceptable and non-acceptable elements of his religion, emphasizes his constant desire to avoid hypocrisy.

Yet, when reading his letter to d'Argence, critics have found further cause to accuse him of such falsity; mockingly Voltaire remarks:

⁵¹⁴ D15659.

⁵¹⁵ D15596.

⁵¹⁶ *Voltaire en son temps*, II, 52.

⁵¹⁷ *Essai sur les mœurs*, II, 331. This separation appears in his comment to his visitor at Ferney regarding God the Father and God the Son, and Pomeau points to the 'nuances' contained in Voltaire's 'purely theist' statement that he died, not as a Catholic, but 'in the Catholic religion' (*La Religion de Voltaire*, p.417, p.353).

toutefois il est fort bon de faire accroire aux hommes qu'ils ont une âme immortelle, et qu'il y a un dieu vengeur qui punira mes paysans s'ils me volent mon blé et mon vin, qui fera rouer là haut les juges des Calas, et brûler ceux d'Abbeville. (20 April 1769)⁵¹⁸

However, despite the sarcastically cynical tone, the message here remains the same: as with tyrants or those in authority, so with ordinary people, it is only religion that can help improve their behaviour by the values demanded in this world, and by the recompense and retribution it promises in the next. Whatever the truth regarding Voltaire's personal trust in a universal God, his discourse suggests that the spiritual is not necessarily excluded by his pragmatic presentation of religious belief as the sole means to restrain those natural human passions and ambitions that are harmful to others. Instead it calls for a balance between the poles of atheism and religious extremism: 'Nous condamnons l'athéisme, nous détestons la superstition barbare, nous aimons Dieu et le genre humain: voilà nos dogmes' (1768).⁵¹⁹

So ideally Voltaire promotes a natural religion without dogmatism, but in reality, for him, established religion often fails on two counts: first, in its interpretation of the divine word, an interpretation that leads to unwitting error and self-deception, and, second, in the way man uses it to manipulate and deceive others. It is in the name of religion that men have produced those reversals from the civilized to the barbaric; while man has made progress with the development of his *génie*, for Voltaire 'dans ce qui concerne la religion, nous sommes revenus au gland, aux peaux de bêtes, et aux cavernes' (1767).⁵²⁰ Religious enthusiasm has driven people to commit acts of savage excess, while institutionalization, disguised by ceremony and rules, has afforded to religious authorities the power to satisfy their own political, financial and carnal ambitions: 'sous le masque de la religion, ils croient pouvoir nuire impunément' (1769). In this way, religions have historically added to the propagation of violence.⁵²¹

Violence may be marked out into a hierarchy of forms and functions: for

⁵¹⁸ D15600.

⁵¹⁹ *Profession de foi des théistes*, p.64.

⁵²⁰ *Le Dîner du Comte de Boulainvilliers*, p.391.

⁵²¹ *Le Pyrrhonisme de l'histoire*, p.297.

retaliation against those seen as enemies or rivals; for personal power and profit; for sexual gratification; and, finally, for reasons that relate to the savage. While on one level this last example may come about in answer to the demands for personal survival (an area that Voltaire appears to understand by his representation of certain demands placed on those at the time seen as 'primitive' people), on another it develops in answer to the paradoxically inhumane expectations or desires of those who profess themselves to be civilized. Voltaire repeatedly indicts the false face that religious ceremonial gives to brutal reality, the way a savage act is euphemistically presented as one of sacrifice, purgation, purification, or the moral conversion of another. Viewing all ritual as based on the misleading of the ignorant or innocent by an artificial performance, one that hides its true purpose, Voltaire therefore repeatedly returns to his representation of the social and religious activities of civilized societies as acts of deception; he sets out to emphasize the way their leaders resort to malicious disguise, to a devious camouflaging of intent.

* * *

Old Testament barbarity

Violence is a central part of what Voltaire portrays as the abominable and the revolting elements in Judaic tradition. It marks the existence, for him, of an ever present moral failure in the Bible and the people it describes. Here, while on one count the condemnation is limited and addressed solely to the Jews of a mythical past, on another it becomes a generalized indictment of all the ancient Jewish people, an indictment that is levelled at them as a uniform group. Voltaire's condemnation, therefore, does not in this case differentiate between individuals, and he stereotypically portrays all biblical Jews as guilty of a willing participation in their savage practices.

To show this, Voltaire constantly seeks to draw a figurative link between what he represents as human sacrifice performed by the Jews, and the barbaric act of cannibalism; in *La Bible enfin expliquée* he writes: 'tant qu'il y eut des Juifs, leur

histoire fut l'histoire des cannibales' (1776).⁵²² Similarly, in *Dieu et les hommes*, linking this alleged practice to their 'total ignorance' of the immortality of the soul, he contends that the Jews 'sont encore les seuls dont la loi ait ordonné expressément de sacrifier des victimes humaines'. He then summarizes: 'Il paraît que les coutumes des Juifs étaient à peu près celles des peuples barbares que nous avons trouvés dans le nord de l'Amérique, Algonguins, Iroquois, Hurons, qui portaient en triomphe le crâne et la chevelure de leurs ennemis tués' (1769).⁵²³ Voltaire reduces the mythical representation of the ancient Jews by reforging a link between them and the living 'uncivilized' peoples of his day; by this manoeuvre he invests them with figures of savagery and brutality. He goes on to conflate the Jews' behaviour with a deeper immorality by suggesting that among these comparable groups they alone have given a legality to their actions, they alone represent their deeds as manifestations of God's law. Thus he questions which is the greatest crime: the pious ceremonial sacrifice of a victim 'à l'honneur de la Divinité', or the eating of one's brutal attacker 'qu'on a tué à son corps défendant'. Emphasizing the division between the practical and the religious, he then indicates that the eating of victims for the satisfaction of hunger belongs in a different category to that of misguided faith and superstition. Using these arguments to strengthen his criticism of the Jews, he justifies the accusations he levels against them by reapplying his logic of deserved blame; he asks rhetorically: 'Et en effet, pourquoi les Juifs n'auraient-ils pas été anthropophages? C'eût été la seule chose qui eût manqué au peuple de Dieu pour être le plus abominable peuple de la terre' (1764).⁵²⁴ However, at times this same accusation is dismantled by mockery; as Besterman writes: in the *Lettre de M. Clocpicre à M. Eratou* (1761) 'Voltaire inquired with persuasive innocence "whether the Jews ate human flesh, and how it was prepared"'.⁵²⁵ So too, in the derisive *Instruction du gardien des Capuchins de Raguse à Frère Pediculoso*, using his much-used figure, Voltaire states: 'Si le déjeuner d'Ézéchiél est un peu puant, le dîner des Israélites, dont il parle est un peu anthropophage' (1768).⁵²⁶ Although we need to

⁵²² *La Bible enfin expliquée*, pp.[117]-118, note 2.

⁵²³ *Dieu et les hommes*, p.371, p.374.

⁵²⁴ 'Anthropophages', p.347, p.349.

⁵²⁵ *Voltaire*, p.462; the passage referred to is found in *Lettre de M. Clocpicre*, p.235-38.

⁵²⁶ *Instruction du gardien des Capuchins*, p.306.

put aside our spontaneous reactions to such highly critical and sarcastic comments, nonetheless these passages allow us again to observe that separation that Voltaire creates between absurdity and reality, between the revolting nature of the 'fables' of the Bible which (he professes) deserve to be ridiculed, and the contemporary Christians' abominable actions which render humour out of place. Having seen how Voltaire realizes the figurative nature of passages, such as that referring to Ezekiel (even if, in many cases, the metaphorical element is barely acknowledged), his connecting of this biblical figure with that relating to the actions of the Israelites, breaks down the literality of the representation as a whole. Moreover, while the tone is highly condemnatory towards the Jews, once more Voltaire does not particularize them, but includes them within the universal, showing that such savage actions in the name of dogma are still practised by people of the contemporary world.

These examples illustrate how, by reference to the uncivilized other, Voltaire diminishes the status of all those readers of the Bible who claim to be either divinely chosen or paragons of enlightened behaviour. He takes the comparison into a new dimension by dismantling the commonly held understanding of what denotes the true meaning of the 'savage'. This he questions in the *Entretiens d'un sauvage et d'un bachelier* where, having shown a natural understanding of the just and the unjust, the so-called savage declares:

Vous me paraissez plaisants, vous autres messieurs les habitants de l'Europe, de prétendre que nous ne pouvons rien avoir sans vous: nous sommes tout autant en droit de croire que nous sommes vos pères, que vous de vous imaginer que vous êtes les nôtres.

Then in the 'savage's' concluding response Voltaire mockingly stresses the particularized nature of the European idea of universal morality: to the question as to whether or not it was necessary that the conquerors should kill the people of Guyana because of their different opinions, 'the savage' replies: 'Oui, pourvu qu'on les mange' (1761).⁵²⁷ In his *contes* Voltaire constantly returns to the paradoxes that mark the supposed separation between the civilized and uncivilized: in the *Histoire de Jenni* the 'good Parouba' describes his peaceable

⁵²⁷ *Entretiens d'un sauvage et d'un bachelier*, p.271.

people as ‘ceux que vous appelez sauvages’ (1775), while in *L’Ingénu* (1767) the Huron is gentle and open-minded, but shocked by the Europeans who commit acts of cruelty beyond the contemplation of the ‘Indians’ of the New World.⁵²⁸ Supposedly less civilized nations show tolerance, and so-called ‘savages’ show qualities absent in certain Christians. In *La Philosophie de l’histoire*, declaring that ‘les peuples du Canada, et les Cafres, qu’il nous a plu d’appeler sauvages, sont infiniment supérieurs aux nôtres’, Voltaire again points to this reversal:

Les prétendus sauvages d’Amérique sont des souverains qui reçoivent des ambassadeurs de nos colonies, que l’avarice et la légèreté ont transplantées auprès de leur territoire. Ils connaissent l’honneur, dont jamais nos sauvages d’Europe n’ont entendu parler.

(1765)⁵²⁹

This passage reveals how ‘savagery’ not only marks the character of the *canaille* who lack ability and reason, but also drives the actions of those Europeans who are in authority. Voltaire therefore reviles the spiritual leaders themselves by commenting: ‘Cependant, et jésuites et jansénistes se réunirent tous contre l’Esprit des lois, et contre ... et contre ... et contre... et contre ... Et nous osons après cela nous moquer des Lapons, des Samoyèdes et des nègres!’ (1764).⁵³⁰

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Sermon des cinquante

In the *Sermon des cinquante* Voltaire clearly draws on this figurative network to link the butchery perpetrated by the ancient Jews to a ‘law of cannibals’ and to alleged acts of human sacrifice. Having described how Moses commanded the priests to kill twenty-three thousand Jews in punishment for their having worshipped the Golden Calf, he then continues:

⁵²⁸ *Histoire de Jenni*, p.545.

⁵²⁹ *La Philosophie de l’histoire*, pp.109-10.

⁵³⁰ ‘Convulsions’, p.643. Peter Gay has pointed out how Voltaire used the term *canaille* as ‘a general *Schimpfwort*, rather than as simply a derogatory term for the masses’ (*Voltaire’s Politics*, p.220, note 82).

Après cette boucherie, il n'est pas étonnant que ce peuple abominable sacrifie des victimes humaines à son Dieu, qu'il appelle *Adonai* du nom d'*Adonis*, qu'il emprunte des Phéniciens. Le vingt-neuvième verset du chapitre XXVII du *Lévitique* défend expressément de racheter les hommes dévoués à l'anathème du sacrifice, et c'est sur cette loi de cannibales que Jephté, quelque temps après, immole sa propre fille.

Voltaire then summarizes: 'Tout cela est exécuté à la lettre selon les livres hébreux.' This alleged proof of the Jews' engagement in ritual human killing allows him to excoriate their unquestioning obedience to the savage dictates of their God. Retracing a history of brutality from the early Jews to the later years of their kings, he sums up:

Ne nous appesantissons pas, mes chers frères, sur les barbaries sans nombre des rois de Juda et d'Israël, sur ces meurtres, sur ces attentats, toujours mêlés de contes ridicules; ce ridicule pourtant est toujours sanguinaire, et il n'y a pas jusqu'au prophète Élisée qui ne soit barbare.

On this occasion, where he unites absurdity and barbarity, Voltaire reveals that his present attack has moved on from questioning the dichotomy between interpretations of the Bible – whether they represent a savage reality or irrelevant falsity. Instead, in this case, his accusations of perniciousness against the Old Testament rest not on whether the accounts are true or untrue (the question of reality now has no importance), but on immoral messages found in the stories themselves.⁵³¹

In the *Sermon* Voltaire reinforces his rhetoric by reference to those events that he repeatedly condemns throughout his *œuvre*. Varying his representation of certain episodes, at times he seeks to diminish the authenticity of the passages, at others to disgust his reader: reporting the massacre of the Midianites, he mocks the biblical narrative by commenting that, were it not for the extravagance of its assertions, 'nous frémirions d'horreur à ce récit'; relating Joshua's massacre of all the inhabitants of Jericho 'sur laquelle il n'avait, de son aveu, aucun droit', he foregrounds the injustice and barbarity of the 'holy' people. These events and other immoral acts of carnage all, according to Voltaire, give evidence of the

⁵³¹ *Sermon des cinquante*, p.441, p.442, pp.443-44.

savage ambition of the Jews, their desire for power and self-advancement. So too, he indicates that Jewish violence was constantly guided by a mistaken idea of retribution and sexual morality. Thus he writes that, following the fatal physical assault on the Levite's wife by the tribe of Benjamin, the eleven other tribes who considered that 'il fallait punir les coupables', slaughtered all but six hundred of the Benjamites. Yet, according to the following satirical comment, the punishment itself was marked by a failure of morality on two counts: first by the savage nature of the retribution carried out, and second by the brutal, undeserved compensation of the perpetrators of the original crime:

les onze tribus sont enfin fâchées de voir périr une des douze, et, pour y remédier, ils exterminent les habitants d'une de leurs propres villes pour y prendre six cents filles qu'ils donnent aux six cents Benjamites survivants pour perpétuer cette belle race.

Voltaire uses this figure to show how violence breeds violence, and how the cycle of brutality can be broken only by the propagation of reason and the rejection of fanaticism.⁵³²

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'Juifs'

In 'Juifs' Voltaire repeats his denunciation of the brutal stories told in the *Sermon des cinquante*, including the Fall of Jericho and the actions of the Benjamites and the eleven other tribes, and he condemns the selfish, pitiless motives that promoted these savage acts. He asserts that violence was used to fulfil the Jews' desire to proliferate and to achieve all their greedy ends. Repeating virtually verbatim his mocking figure of the *Sermon* regarding the attack against the Midianites, he continues: 'Tous les hommes, toutes les femmes, et les enfants mâles, furent massacrés: les filles et le butin furent partagés entre le peuple et les sacrificateurs' (1756). No distinctions are made between the young girls and the booty, that is between their roles as women and as sacrificial objects of abuse. This figure, therefore, combines all the elements of violence; the savage slaughter,

⁵³² *Sermon des cinquante*, p.442.

the selfish power struggles, the retaliatory actions, and finally the sexual exploitation. But at the same time it allows Voltaire to develop his argument further, to re-address his even more troubling accusation against the Jews: their alleged involvement in human sacrifice. He writes: 'Les savants ont agité la question si les Juifs sacrifiaient en effet des hommes à la Divinité, comme tant d'autres nations' (1756). In this case the personalized nature of the condemnation is somewhat reduced by being included in a more universal framework, but Voltaire immediately indicates that the answer to the question he poses is irrelevant, a mere 'question de nom'. He contends that a law which declares that people must die, in whatever circumstances, cannot be separated from the law of cannibals. Whether or not the murder occurs on 'un autel avec des rites religieux', it always remains an act of human sacrifice (1756). Thus Voltaire feels able to include Jephthah's slaughter of his daughter, Saul's intended murder of his son, and Samuel's butchery of Agag, as examples of Jewish cannibalistic ritual killing. With bitter sarcasm he commiserates with the ancient Jews; expressing mock sympathy for their calamities, and then, referring again to the actions of Jephthah, he writes: 'il lui fit comme il avait voué; et il avait voué d'égorger sa fille pour remercier le Seigneur. Belle action de grâces!' (1771). This much repeated argument appears in almost identical form in the private papers where Voltaire states that, while human sacrifice was generally common in 'barbarian times', in Leviticus it was expressly ordered 'd'immoler les hommes qu'on aura voués en anathème au Seigneur'. He then sums up:

Il n'est donc que trop vrai que les Juifs, suivant leurs lois, sacrifiaient des victimes humaines.

Cet acte de religion s'accorde avec leurs mœurs; leurs propres livres les représentent

égorgeant sans miséricorde tout ce qu'ils rencontrent, et réservant seulement les filles pour

leur usage.

(undated)⁵³³

In the 'Réponse à quelques objections', while mockingly professing compassion for the Jews, Voltaire takes his ridicule onto a further plane. In order to re-emphasize the connection between immorality and the absence of a religious truth, he adopts a tone of the most savage sarcasm that plays with the metaphorical

⁵³³ 'Juifs', p.513, p.534, p.523.

significance of the passage:

Parmi vos calamités, qui m'ont fait tant de fois frémir, j'ai toujours compté le malheur que vous avez eu de manger de la chair humaine. Vous dites que cela n'est arrivé que dans les grandes occasions, que ce n'est pas vous que le Seigneur invitait à sa table pour manger le cheval et le cavalier, que c'étaient les oiseaux qui étaient les convives; je le veux croire.

And, continuing to feign sympathy, Voltaire declares: 'Oui, vous avez immolé des victimes humaines au Seigneur; mais consolez-vous: je vous ai dit souvent que nos Welches et toutes les nations en firent autant autrefois' (1771).⁵³⁴ But, in this case, by his reference to the *Welches* (his pejorative term for the unenlightened French) and other nations, his criticism against the Jews is again softened somewhat; they are not particularized, but included in the universal to which the people of France themselves belong: despite the sarcastic tone, Voltaire indicates mankind's shared inheritance of inhuman brutality.⁵³⁵

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La Pucelle

Once more showing the negative examples that the scriptures have given to future generations, in *La Pucelle* Voltaire repeats the violent figures of war found in the Bible: the savage treatment of women and the brutal butchery of victims. But he also draws our attention to the ludicrous nature of many of the biblical claims: the conflicts fought with primitive or impractical weapons, the conquest of Jericho following the collapse of its walls at the sounding of the Israelites' trumpets. By contriving to link these events with those of Charles VII's army and Jeanne's victory at Orleans, he lays bare, what is for him, the illogical or impossible nature of the sacred stories.

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⁵³⁴ 'Juifs', p.535, p.534.

⁵³⁵ See *Supplément du discours aux Welches* (1764), p.254.

Candide

In *Candide*, again representing contemporary brutality in terms that recall the ancient scriptures, Voltaire reiterates his biblical figures of battlefields and the savagery that results from war. Young women, according to the *droit de guerre*, an oxymoronic phrase that subverts the very idea of rights, may be ‘éventrées après avoir assouvi les besoins naturels de quelques héros’, a statement that by use of antiphrasis, foregrounds the conquerors’ false presentation of heroism. Portraying the women as victims of both sexual and retaliatory violence, Voltaire shows how, through the application of a false logic and a mistaken idea of justice, they, as the spoils of war, may be raped and then murdered.⁵³⁶

But he also introduces other figures of violence away from the battlefield: the savage castration of the Neopolitan singer, the mutilation of the old woman and the black slave; the exploitation of Paquette; the ritualized murder of various individuals by the Inquisition; the execution of victims by the power-hungry Turkish authorities in Constantinople. In *Candide* the indictment of the savage is universal, directed against the multiple forms of brutality practised by all mankind. Moreover, the *vieille*’s mutilation at the hands of the janissaries, performed so that they may avoid starvation and thereby not break their oath to withstand their enemies, serves to indict all such foolish adherence to barbaric dictates or religious promises. In addition, by representing the imam as applying to the old woman the same balm ‘qu’on met aux enfants qu’on vient de circoncire’, Voltaire links the cutting off of her buttock to the act of circumcision, thereby placing all such rites and practices in the field of the general; in this instance he does not particularize such brutal actions as so-called Jewish failings alone.⁵³⁷

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Essai sur les mœurs and La Philosophie de l’histoire

In the *Essai sur les mœurs* Voltaire reunites cannibalism and murder (or human sacrifice), but defines a fundamental difference between these actions, one that reinforces his reduction of the latter to the lowest level of savagery. The

⁵³⁶ *Candide*, p.127.

⁵³⁷ *Candide*, p.161.

former, the eating of victims, while an atrocity that is 'si révoltante pour notre nature, est pourtant bien moins cruelle que le meurtre', and thus 'la véritable barbarie est de donner la mort, et non de disputer un mort aux corbeaux ou au vers'. He sets aside European prejudice in order to distinguish between the moral and the immoral, the just treatment of another human being and violent injustice. To drive his point home, he represents in historical terms the biblical Jews' allegedly savage acts performed in mistaken or foolish obedience to God's supposed commandments. With a further underplaying of the metaphorical content of the episodes, Voltaire writes:

Les plus anciens livres que nous ayons ne nous permettent pas de douter que la faim n'ait poussé les hommes à cet excès. Moïse même menace les Hébreux, dans cinq versets du *Deutéronome*, qu'ils mangeront leurs enfants s'ils transgressent sa loi. Le prophète Ézéchiel répète la même menace, et ensuite, selon plusieurs commentateurs, il promet aux Hébreux, de la part de Dieu, que s'ils se défendent bien contre le roi de Perse, ils auront à manger de la chair de cheval et de la chair de cavalier. (1761)⁵³⁸

In line with this, in *La Philosophie de l'histoire* Voltaire returns to those much-repeated acts of butchery reported in the Old Testament: the massacre ordered by Moses; Jephthah's sacrifice of his daughter; Samuel's murder of Agag. But, more seriously, he attacks Judaism itself, questioning how reasoning individuals might believe in 'a fugitive people from Egypt' who by 'express order' of God 'soit venu [...] immoler sept ou huit petites nations qu'il ne connaissait pas'. He queries how these people could be punished by that same God 'pour épargner un seul homme dévoué à l'anathème' (1765).⁵³⁹ When writing to d'Argence, Voltaire declares that a religion insults the Divinity by claiming that God could have ordered his people to perform such acts of fanaticism: 'C'est outrager Dieu, si les hommes peuvent l'outrager' (11 October 1763).⁵⁴⁰ And later, in a similar way, regarding the episodes recounted in the book of Joshua, he declares:

⁵³⁸ *Essai sur les mœurs*, II, 388-89.

⁵³⁹ *La Philosophie de l'histoire*, p.213.

⁵⁴⁰ D11453.

L'auteur, pour ajouter le blasphème au brigandage et à la barbarie, ose dire que toutes ces abominations se commettaient au nom de Dieu, par order exprès de Dieu, et étaient autant de sacrifices de sang humain offerts à Dieu. (1767)⁵⁴¹

These comments take his criticism back to the area of the alleged immorality of the Jews and their mistaken belief in their divinely chosen status, allowing him to reach a highly satirical conclusion: while there might be difficulty in believing that 'un peuple si abominable eût pu exister sur la terre', because these facts are in their holy books, 'il faut la croire' (1765).⁵⁴² Thus he brings his argument full circle, proving by his logic that the immorality of the Bible stories reveals even the reported accounts of brutality to be works of fiction, and this lifts his indictment away from the Jews as a living people and encloses it within the field of myth-making and the religious. And Voltaire goes further, showing how it is this aspect that marks the Jews out as different from all other peoples. In *Le Pyrrhonisme de l'histoire*, addressing the problems faced by those who want to find logical answers and explanations for the questions raised by the brutality and absurdity of the biblical stories, Voltaire writes satirically:

On pourrait faire ces questions et mille autres encore plus embarrassantes, si les livres des Juifs étaient, comme les autres, un ouvrage des hommes; mais étant d'une nature entièrement différente, ils exigent la vénération, et ne permettent aucune critique. Le champ du pyrrhonisme est ouvert pour tous les autres peuples, mais il est fermé pour les Juifs. (1769)⁵⁴³

It is Judaism itself, rather than Jewish practices, that sets the Jews apart from other people. But, more seriously, it is this religion (like Christianity) that has given the stories authority, and so it is religion alone that must be held responsible for the calumnies perpetrated against the Jews.

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⁵⁴¹ *Examen important*, p.196.

⁵⁴² *La Philosophie de l'histoire*, p.213.

⁵⁴³ *Le Pyrrhonisme de l'histoire*, p.243.

Christian barbarity and intolerance

Expanding the separation between Christians and Jews, Voltaire further dismantles the usual European understanding; he introduces these not just in terms of the self and other, but in a guise that no longer positively prioritizes the former group. Reversing the stereotypical representation of a negative Jewish causality, he stresses how the Christians' mistaken pride has prevented them from learning from those that they believe to be their inferiors. In his letter of 1 March 1764 to d'Alembert, he rhetorically addresses the French:

Vous prétendez que votre religion doit être cruelle autant qu'absurde, parce qu'elle est fondée, je ne sais comment, sur la religion du petit peuple juif, le plus absurde et le plus barbare de tous les peuples; mais je vous prouve, mes chers Welches, que tout abominable qu'était ce peuple, tout atroce, tout sot qu'il était, il a cependant donné cent exemples de la tolérance la plus grande.⁵⁴⁴

Rejecting for the most part the critical figures so often attributed to the Jews, and again portraying them in terms of their tolerance, Voltaire raises the argument to another level, one that draws attention to the contrast between the open-minded Jews and the intolerant Christians who have followed them. Here solely in his expression of surprise at the paradox that this presents does he give evidence of persisting European anti-Jewish prejudice.

By repeatedly referring to the tolerance of the Jews of more recent times, he shows how the Christians' failure to heed the beneficial lessons of their 'fathers' has negated the Jewish responsibility for the intolerance of its heirs. And, to reinforce the difference between the Christians and the religious others that they so frequently deprecate, he takes his comparison further, moving it into yet another field. He shows how the Muslims of old in Spain treated people of other religions with tolerance, while the Christians butcher 'non-believers' in the name of, what he presents as, minor or illogical differences of custom, such as circumcision or laws of ablution. Assuming the voice of the rabbi, Voltaire

⁵⁴⁴ D11739.

exclaims: 'Ah! mes frères, quelle raison pour brûler des hommes!' (1761).⁵⁴⁵ It is now the people of Europe who, because of their lack of charity and humanity, deserve to be called savage: their actions are those of 'des anthropophages'. Moreover, by further reference to Old Testament acts of savagery, he demonstrates how the Christians have not just failed to learn from their forebears, but have gone further: drawing on the biblical examples of intolerance, they have then created 'des phrases pour justifier ces fables de cannibales' so that in turn they can prove the rightness of their own faith (1766).⁵⁴⁶ Voltaire affirms that the Christians have used the religious texts to *create specious justifications for their* acts of persecution; as example, he refers to the time of Henri IV's struggles with the Ligue, when Christian apologists made use of the Jewish scriptures:

C'est une chose digne d'attention que la fourberie et le fanatisme avec lesquels tous les auteurs de ce temps-là cherchent à soutenir leurs sentiments par les livres juifs: comme si les usages d'un petit peuple confiné dans les rochers de la Palestine devaient être, au bout de trois mille ans, la règle du royaume de France. (1769)⁵⁴⁷

Worse still, in their selective reading of the texts, Christians have intentionally ignored the allegorical nature of the stories in order to pursue their own devious ends. Rhetorically Voltaire asks: 'Comment pourrions-nous prendre au pied de la lettre ce que les Juifs ont regardé comme des contes?' (1766). Now, fully acknowledging the Bible's metaphorical nature, Voltaire takes his indictment away from the ancient people of a mythical past, and redirects it towards all those contemporary individuals who continue to choose to revere such fictions as holy truths.⁵⁴⁸

Voltaire criticizes the Jews for their having given many immoral examples to the people who follow them, but his attack against the Christians is of a more serious order. They are personally responsible for their own behaviour, although they seek to excuse themselves by claiming that when murdering, lying, deceiving, stealing they are treading in the footsteps of the ancients. He stresses

⁵⁴⁵ *Sermon du Rabbin Akib*, p.280.

⁵⁴⁶ *Examen important*, p.198.

⁵⁴⁷ *Essai sur les mœurs*, II, 544.

⁵⁴⁸ *Examen important*, p.193.

that imitation does not remove personal fault, and that responsibility for our own actions cannot be attributed to others:

Mais si un Juif a été barbare jusqu'à son dernier moment, que nous importe? Sommes-nous Juifs? Quel rapport les absurdités et les horreurs de ce petit peuple ont-elles avec nous? On a consacré des crimes chez presque tous les peuples du monde: que devons-nous faire? Les détester, et adorer le Dieu qui les condamne. (1767)⁵⁴⁹

Positing the insane character of the acts recorded in the Bible, Voltaire writes of those who continue to copy them: 'Mais, malheureux, tu n'es ni Rachel, ni Jacob, ni Abraham, ni Dieu; tu n'es qu'un fou furieux' (1776). And, to underline the illogical perversity of those who seek to absolve themselves by blaming others, Voltaire here reverses the order of his biblical examples; while earlier in the sentence he moves them from 'God', to 'Abraham', to 'Jacob', to 'Rachel', now he takes them upwards from Rachel to God. This emphasizes the hypocrisy of Christian claims; in taking their false teachings right up to God himself, they blasphemously attribute to him the greatest of crimes, murder.⁵⁵⁰

As with the Jews, so too with the Christians, Voltaire condemns all ceremonial slaughter, those contrived acts of supposed religious ceremony, by integrating it into the figure of the purely savage, the 'loi de cannibales'. He creates a network between the sacrificial or cannibalistic acts of 'primitive' peoples and the sanctimonious claims of the *auto-da-fé*. He writes:

C'est le plus horrible effet des superstitions qui ont inondé la terre, que d'immoler des hommes à la Divinité. Mais cette abomination est bien plus naturelle qu'on ne croit. Les anciens actes de foi des Espagnols et des Portugais, [...] nos massacres d'Irlande, la Saint-Barthélemy de France, les croisades des papes contre les empereurs, et ensuite contre les peuples de la langue d'oc; toutes ces épouvantables effusions de sang humain ont-elles été autre chose que des victimes humaines offertes à Dieu par des insensés et des barbares? (1769)⁵⁵¹

Voltaire unites the Christians with the rest of humanity as both victimizers and

⁵⁴⁹ *Homélie prononcées à Londres*, p.441.

⁵⁵⁰ *La Bible enfin expliquée*, p.136, note 1.

⁵⁵¹ *Dieu et les hommes*, p.371.

victims of such savagery, and the figure of cannibalism thus becomes central to his campaign against intolerance.

But he also adds a second level to his attack, one that brings together in the shared representation of cannibalism the sacrificial elements of the Jewish rites and the Christian celebration of the presence of Christ's body in the bread eaten at Mass. He undermines not just the practices of the religion, but goes so far as to deprecate the very doctrines on which it is founded. In this way, he reduces the highest claims of doctrinal difference to a (for Voltaire) very low order, an equal level of barbarity and ridicule. The doctrine of transsubstantiation becomes mocked not just by its dependence on unintelligible dogma, but also by the mundanely physical essence of the communion bread. This, for Voltaire, marks 'la manducation supérieure, l'âme nourrie ainsi que le corps des membres et du sang de l'homme, Dieu adoré et mangé sous la forme du pain, présent aux yeux, sensible au goût, et cependant anéanti' (1764).⁵⁵² In *Le Dîner du Comte de Boulainvilliers* Voltaire emphasizes how superstition, here linked both to the person of Christ and to the making of gods 'avec de la farine', has caused 'civilized' people to descend lower than the 'savages' (1767).⁵⁵³

In the *Sermon du Rabbin Akib* Voltaire plays on a vocabulary of food with its implied reference to anthropophagy; he speaks of the thirty-two Israelites 'consumed' by the flames and 'devoured' by the fires of the *auto-da-fé*. He also satirically refers to the lack of proof as to whether or not certain victims were eaten after their burning; he mockingly suggests the probability of such treatment in the case of the two 'appetising' fat young boys. Voltaire thus enables his Jewish protagonist to reinscribe sacrificial murder in terms of cannibalism, and to lay an accusation of presumed guilt on the Christians. These passages acquire still greater significance by appearing alongside the rabbi's call for a separation to be made between the charges of barbarity – including murder and cannibalism – levelled against biblical Jews by their enemies, and the actuality of the Jews' contemporary existence; the implication behind his discourse is that, even while modern Christians perform the very same actions of which they accuse others, they make

⁵⁵² 'Religion', pp.478-79.

⁵⁵³ *Le Dîner du Comte de Boulainvilliers*, p.397.

use of calumny to justify persecution of those with whom they do not agree.⁵⁵⁴ Moving on from this, we see that Voltaire's intent is to reapply the same logic against the Christians that elsewhere he uses to indict the ancient Jews; he shows that the accuracy of the charges, the epithet given to a perceived action, is of less importance than the reality of the crime itself. For him, it is a question of semantics by what name murder is defined, and so he adopts the same metaphor to describe the 'Arlequins anthropophages' that killed, or attempted to kill, Calas, Sirven and La Barre (16 July 1766), and 'la rage des cannibales des Cévennes' (1766).⁵⁵⁵

Investigating the examples of violence performed for reasons of retribution and retaliation, Voltaire condemns the way brutal punishment is falsely justified by reference to the victim's own guilt; he repudiates the manner in which the condemned individual is represented as deserving of his treatment, regardless of how extreme his punishment may be. The criminal is responsible for his own actions, but the way his crime is punished becomes the responsibility of another. While the excuse of blame has been used to vindicate the workings of the Inquisition, in Voltaire's view, even if certain behaviour is found to be intolerable, no punitive or corrective treatment should be excessively barbaric or severe. According to him, the primary purpose of such brutality on the part of the perpetrators is to secure their own power and personal profit. Moreover, a similar purpose lies behind much of the bloodshed that has occurred throughout the Christian world: while differing interpretations of dogmas have caused divisions between various sects, it is in the false name of religious enthusiasm with its pretensions of reforming the wrongdoers that ever increasing acts of savagery have been perpetrated. Writing at the end of his life, Voltaire states:

Les fanatiques de Port-Royal et les fanatiques jésuites se sont réunis pour prêcher ces dogmes étranges avec le même enthousiasme; et en même temps ils se sont fait une guerre mortelle. Ils se sont mutuellement anathématisés avec fureur, jusqu'à ce qu'une de ces deux factions de possédés ait enfin détruit l'autre.

⁵⁵⁴ *Sermon du Rabbin Akib*, p.281.

⁵⁵⁵ D13420 to Comte and Comtesse d'Argental; *Avis au public*, p.533. With the help of Voltaire, in 1770 the protestant Sirven was finally cleared of the charge of murdering his daughter who had been put into the care of the Catholics.

Souvenez-vous, sages lecteurs, des temps mille fois plus horribles de ces énergumènes, nommés *papistes* et *calvinistes*, qui prêchaient le fond des mêmes dogmes, et qui se poursuivirent par le fer, par la flamme, et par le poison, pendant deux cents années pour quelques mots différemment interprétés. (1777)⁵⁵⁶

Finally, Voltaire takes his attack against Christian dogma into a new area: the Church's responsibility for parricide, the slaughter of the fathers of the state. Here he indicts those spiritual authorities who have used their power to incite the more unthinking to acts of murder. He underlines the hypocritical nature of these actions: 'les bons pères avaient saintement mis le couteau dans les mains des parricides.' Again emphasizing the hypocrisy of the Church, he exposes how its leaders have endeavoured to distance themselves from their crimes by declaring 'ce n'est pas nous' (1759).⁵⁵⁷ Voltaire's argument here relates to that regarding the 'dangerous' power of confession; as he remarks: 'Les assassins des Sforces, des Médicis, des princes d'Orange, des rois de France, se préparèrent aux parricides par le sacrement de la confession' (1765).⁵⁵⁸ In such cases, Voltaire presents the murderers as mindless henchmen, their confessors as schemers who use their position to ensure their social standing.

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Sermon des cinquante

In the *Sermon des cinquante* Voltaire darkens his mockery by commenting that in their doctrine of transsubstantiation the Catholics 'poussent [...] l'extravagance' to the point where they put their god 'dans un morceau de pâte'. He contends that the early Christians' committed blasphemy when they declared Jesus to be God, and this act of sacrilege continues to be taken to its extreme in the Mass. He brings his attack against transsubstantiation down to the processes of literal incorporation, digestion and excretion:

⁵⁵⁶ *Dernières remarques*, pp.38-39.

⁵⁵⁷ *Mémoires*, p.59.

⁵⁵⁸ 'Confession', *VF*, pp.634-35.

tandis que leur dieu est mangé des souris, qu'on le digère, qu'on le rend avec les excréments, ils soutiennent qu'il n'y a pas de pain dans leur hostie, que c'est Dieu seul qui s'est mis à la place du pain, à la voix d'un homme.⁵⁵⁹

The figure contrasts the physical character of the host, with the claimed metaphysical status of the deity, given alleged presence merely by a human pronouncement. Voltaire sees the Mass as another example of the Church's manipulation of that superstition which connects with those other 'rapacious activities' of confession and absolution, activities that have allowed the Church to strengthen its hold on the people by the threatened withholding of these mysteries. He asserts the double character of the holy fathers' actions: first, these sacraments have given priests a false power that has caused suffering to their flock, and allowed them to trick the people into obedience; second, and even more fundamentally, the very denial of the claimed benefits rests on, what is for him, a falsity. Voltaire connects in an ever-descending spiral of condemnation, transubstantiation, confession, indulgences, exorcisms, 'false miracles' and 'ridiculous images', and he argues that the spread of such superstitions has led the Church to become divided, a situation that has brought about the mutual assassination and massacre of Christian followers.

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Candide

In *Candide* the issue of cannibalism appears in the episode of the Oreillons, who prepare to eat the hero, believing him to be a Jesuit, and here Voltaire introduces a further dimension that levels an even more satirical criticism at his own society. The 'savages' allow themselves to be persuaded to desist from their actions by listening to reason, in contrast to the 'holy' fathers who remain constant in their determination to persecute by fire. In the latter case, the figure of constancy conflates with that of obstinacy, a rigid adherence to a thinking that refuses reason and is driven by private ambition – a representation that takes on further significance when placed alongside Voltaire's repeated portrayal of the

⁵⁵⁹ *Sermon des cinquante*, p.452.

Christians' inconstancy in the matter of their vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. Furthermore, Candide's comment that to cook other men is inhumane an act that is 'peu chrétien', points to the paradox underlying Christian savagery – a figure that reappears in *La Pucelle* with the comment that Clovis' presumed murder of others 'n'est pas trop chrétien' (1730-62). These episodes reintroduce Voltaire's polemic on the true nature of the term 'Christian/christian'. Throughout the *conte* prelates seek their revenge through a distorted representation of morality, while the alleged savages, the Oreillons, alone endeavour to verify their facts before carrying out their execution. By emphasizing the latter's rational searching for proof, diametrically opposed to the inquisitors' irrational reliance on unproven evidence, Voltaire increases the distance he stresses between the two groups.⁵⁶⁰

In *Candide*, condemning brutality, he demonstrates that all mutilation is savage, whether in the name of art, of commerce, or of faith. He introduces into the story the Neopolitan who has been castrated so that he can sing to God's glory in the chapel, a figure that by combining a Christian religious objective with physical mutilation removes the negative particularity of Judaic circumcision. Moreover, the old woman's story of suffering for the sake of upholding a religious promise not only connects with the Old Testament accounts of Jephthah, Saul and Samuel, but further serves to expand Voltaire's attack on hypocritical unreason. By juxtaposing his figures, by uniting the fulfilment of a sacred vow with the satisfaction of hunger, Voltaire links excessive religious fervour to cannibalism, intentionally confusing the religious and the pragmatic. But it is with the devious thinking of the imam, for whom the infliction of suffering is better than breaking an oath, that the argument moves into another area, one that repeatedly occurs in Voltaire's writing. In 'Carême' he questions the logic of those who claim that during a fast the rich 'papist' feasting on his fish does not sin, while the starving pauper may be damned for eating a scrap of meat. Fasting is merely a matter of will for the rich, but the poor 'font carême toute l'année' (1769).⁵⁶¹ In his notebooks Voltaire sums up the illogical and destructive nature of such dictates, again demarcating the useful from the useless, and differentiating the actions of

⁵⁶⁰ *Candide*, p.179; *La Pucelle*, V, p.349, note de Voltaire.

⁵⁶¹ 'Carême', p.436, p.437.

those who claim to assist mankind and those who give real, practical help to the rest of society: 'Jeûner, prier, vertu de bonze; secourir, vertu de citoyen' (1735-50?).⁵⁶²

He does not acknowledge the symbolic significance whereby, as Douglas explains, most dietary laws give order to the world. In the case of the Jews, he repeatedly ridicules their ideas of the clean and the unclean, often conflating these definitions with a biological fallacy such as the ruminating hare without a cloven foot. But, at the same time, Voltaire realizes the price the Jews have paid for remaining loyal to their beliefs. In *Candide* he uses the Jewish food laws as a marker of the Jews' separateness, a metonymic reference to the outsider status that has been used to justify their persecution. Through antithesis, in this *conte* he portrays the victims of the Inquisition as persecuted solely because they have removed the lard from their chicken: they are condemned to die in the *auto-da-fé*, not because they are reputed to have broken any specific laws, Jewish or Christian, but because by their actions they have defined themselves as Jewish, and on these grounds alone they are to be put to death. Moreover, even while allowing himself mockingly to adopt the popular stereotype, Voltaire again shows in the Jews a real constancy that undermines the Christians' claims to comparable religious obedience; while the former firmly hold to laws and beliefs that may bring about their persecution, the latter have an elastic attitude to their dictates. The enforcement of the Christian rules such as abstinence from certain foods at certain times, or the teaching on chastity and obedience, impinges most on the people least able to conform to its dictates: the vulnerable are subordinated to a ruling from which the authorities are partially, if not wholly, exempt.

The murder of the Jews at the *auto-da-fé* introduces a figure of violence marked by a retaliatory objective. But, at the same time, by placing the Jews beside the other victims, Voltaire draws attention to the full range of the Church leaders' devious thinking. Just as the Jews are condemned in the name of their 'foolish' practices, a *Biscayen* is to be burnt in punishment for his 'incestuous' relationship with his co-godparent, and Pangloss and Candide are declared guilty, the first for saying too much, the second for remaining silent. Voltaire reveals the nonsensical nature of the excuses given by the inquisitors for their choice of

⁵⁶² 'Leningrad notebook', p.395.

victims for execution. He shows how, by playing on fear in order to bolster its position, the Christian Church deploys both physical and spiritual means to scare its flock into obedience: its violence expresses itself in a dual use of intimidation, that is in the physical threat of torture and execution, and in the mental dread of excommunication, the denial of absolution and last rites. Voltaire's focus on the manipulative nature of the Church's teachings on salvation and resurrection, partially disqualifies his other arguments about the 'foolishness' of people who have not put their faith in a doctrine he so often presents as beneficial to society. The intentional savagery behind the Christian threat of eternal damnation emerges as a more vile example of unreasoning than the early Jews' 'foolish' belief in the non-prosecution of the guilty in the afterlife.

In his argument against the sacrament of confession, Voltaire traces its history from other ancient societies to the biblical Jews and then to the early Christians. This allows him to condemn the way the Church has moved it from a lay context to a religious one: 'Les Juifs se confessaient à leurs camarades, et les chrétiens aussi. Il parut dans la suite plus convenable que ce droit appartînt aux prêtres' (1774).⁵⁶³ As a result, according to Voltaire, the Abbés were able to 'invent' a new formula: absolution. Condemning this latter practice for the arrogance it manifests in those officiators who claim to be able to absolve the sins of others, Voltaire contends that 'il semble qu'il eût été plus respectueux pour l'Être suprême, et plus juste de dire: "Puisse-t-il pardonner à tes fautes et aux miennes!"' (1765).⁵⁶⁴ Then reversing the figure of the confidentiality of the confessional, he makes the further charge that 'quelques confesseurs, pour accorder leur intérêt avec le sacrilège, usent d'un singulier artifice. Ils rendent compte, non pas précisément de ce que le prisonnier leur a dit, mais de ce qu'il ne leur a pas dit' (1771): priests, under the cloak of secrecy, for their own purposes have been able to distort the truth and falsely spread calumny and lies.⁵⁶⁵ Aware of the difference between Protestant and Catholic practices, Voltaire sarcastically presents the distinction in a way that diminishes even more the significance of the latter; he contends that Protestants confess to God (who cannot be deceived), while Catholics confess to men who

⁵⁶³ 'Confession', M.xviii, p.224 (originally in the *Questions sur l'Encyclopédie*).

⁵⁶⁴ 'Confession', VF, p.634.

⁵⁶⁵ 'Confession', M.xviii, p.226 (originally in the *Questions sur l'Encyclopédie*).

cannot know what the sinner wishes to omit. This instance undermines Voltaire's claimed reluctance to enter into the disputes that divide the religious sects; he sets up confession as another area where the Catholic Church acts differently from the Jews and other peoples. As practised by the Church of Rome, confession deserves to be repudiated because the authorities make play of superstition; it is a highly pernicious practice, a tool for fanatics to incite the unreasoning to barbarous acts. In *Candide*, by his oblique reference to Damiens' attempted assassination of Louis XV, Voltaire reiterates his charge against the men of the Church; he repeats his contention that they promote the criminal actions of certain unthinking members of their flock. The latter, having listened to the *sottises* of their spiritual leaders, become inspired to commit murder.⁵⁶⁶

In this *conte* Voltaire also focuses on the way society has continued to use violence to pursue sexual ambitions; he presents this as an ever present threat, the dark side of human nature. Throughout *Candide*, in every sphere except Eldorado, the image is one of sexual ambition, exploitation or violence, as seen in the stories of Cunégonde, the old woman, the *castrato*, and, in a different register, the women with the monkeys. Even the gentle Candide looks on his beloved, 'appetising' Cunégonde with a consuming gaze, so that from the start of the story she appears as little more than an object of sexual desire. Similarly, the passage relating to the *Bulgares* and *Abares* moves swiftly from a description of the armies' supposed devotion in the service of their God, to one of butchery, brutality, rape and abduction. In *Le Siècle de Louis XIV* Voltaire focuses clearly on the contradiction that exists in reality between the proclaimed triumphs of supposed victors and the brutal realities experienced by the victims of war: 'on périssait de misère au bruit des *Te Deum* et parmi les réjouissances' (1735-52). Exposing the tension underlying the glorious representations of war where, even within the supposedly charitable Christian world, women are the 'rightful' booty of the savage aggressor, Voltaire links together all the forms of violence, from the retaliatory to the personally ambitious, the sexual to the savage.⁵⁶⁷

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⁵⁶⁶ *Candide*, p.221.

⁵⁶⁷ *Le Siècle de Louis XIV*, I, 317.

La Pucelle

La Pucelle repeats Voltaire's representation of war as a brutal act that claims a false authority and legality to satisfy personal ambitions and carnal desires. With echoes of the Old Testament texts, the English prince claims his victor's spoils: murdering, raping, 'taxing' and 'pillaging' (1730-62). And in the elaborate preparations for the *auto-da-fé*, Voltaire portrays through antiphrasis the ceremonial's fundamental misinterpretation of justice: 'On voit déjà la ville où la justice / Arrangeait tout pour cet affreux supplice' (1730-62).⁵⁶⁸

In this text the issue of confession and absolution serves to reveal further paradoxes contained within Church teaching. First, Voltaire questions the justice of a faith that promises redemption to criminals who repent at the moment of death, while those whom he honours, such as Marcus Aurelius, Trajan, Plato and Socrates, are 'tous malheureux morts sans confession' (1730-62).⁵⁶⁹ As in the *Traité sur la tolérance*, he questions the paradox whereby such 'modèles des hommes' are condemned to eternal damnation, while those such as Ravaillac and Damiens who might have died 'avec les formules prescrites' are saved (1763). These figures serve to introduce further elements into Voltaire's argument about the utility of a belief in the afterlife, and into his representation of the early Jews' lack of this belief. In *La Pucelle* redemption and resurrection are no longer presented as relevant to the promotion of good behaviour, since, although Grisbourdon and others receive just punishment for their crimes, this results from their own pride and obstinacy: they refuse confession. In this way Voltaire further illustrates the lack of reason that he contends lies at the heart of Christianity. Although portraying both Jews and Christians as unpunished for their personal sins, as escaping the retribution they deserve, he marks the difference between the two cases: at the moment of death, Christians find absolution in the 'word of man'. Voltaire therefore throws doubt on the justice of a faith that allows life-long sinners to be redeemed, while worthy human beings, ignorant of Christ's teachings, are denied salvation – an indictment linked to his deprecation of the doctrine of original sin. From the question of which criminals and assassins might

⁵⁶⁸ *La Pucelle*, I, 190, p.267; VI, 400-01, p.373.

⁵⁶⁹ *La Pucelle*, V, 89, p.348.

have benefited from confession and last-minute absolution, Voltaire then moves to the condemnation of all such Church practices, including excommunication and those false extensions of confession itself, indulgences, whereby the sinner obtains forgiveness by a mere financial transaction. Indulgences, ‘trafficked’ by Pope Leo X ‘pour payer ses plaisirs’ (1763), become representative of the Catholic Church’s avaricious greed, just like those other practices that Voltaire ridicules, simony, and the buying of papal permission in order to arrange or annul a marriage. Through these examples, he affirms that the obtainment of spiritual purity, the meriting of religious office, and the definition of incest all come to depend solely on wealth, social position, and, above all, the word, not of God, but of man.⁵⁷⁰

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‘Juifs’

The figures found in *Candide* recur in ‘Juifs’; Voltaire questions the false logic that claims an act of violence legitimizes a retaliatory act of savagery, attacks the mistaken notion of an oath and the misplaced sense of virtue, and condemns the religious deviousness that has invested savage actions with sanctity. In the Seventh Letter, he brings together the Christians and the Jews in a unified tradition of sacrificial brutality and absurdity, in this case emphasizing the social element present in the actions of the former group, the religious in the latter. His argument against the Church rests on its use of laymen to carry out its brutal acts, while that against the Jews attacks their continuing ‘ridiculous’ adherence to a past religious tradition. But his indictment against the Jews simultaneously implies the possibility that if they should reject their ancient beliefs, a better, more reasoning, future might become open to them. This passage prompts us to ask whether in this instance Voltaire is deepening the chasm between the two groups, whether he is stressing that difference which he observes between the Jewish spirit of tolerance and indifference, and the Christian one of intolerance and ambitious religious enthusiasm. He entertains the prospect that educated Jews might eventually reject all blind faith and be assimilated into enlightened society. But in the case of the Christians, by his repeated negative expositions of their characteristically brutal

⁵⁷⁰ *Traité sur la tolérance*, p.250, p.141.

behaviour, he opens up the possibility that, with their growing temporal power, Christ's followers could take to ever more extreme limits the selfish and materialistic agenda pursued in the name of their faith.

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Essai sur les mœurs and La Philosophie de l'histoire

The figures of savagery and hypocrisy combine once more in the *Essai sur les mœurs*'s representation of the *auto-da-fé*. Voltaire further particularizes his condemnation of the Christians, deploring the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century practice of granting confession and absolution to prisoners before their execution: 'On était barbare en cérémonie chez les peuples chrétiens occidentaux; et ce raffinement d'inhumanité n'a jamais été connu que d'eux' (1769). Even when allegedly absolved of their sins, victims were still put to death. This reverses another popular stereotype of European superiority, one grounded in the idea that refinement is linked to progress; instead, it is in the Christian world that plumbing the ultimate depths of inhumanity goes hand in hand with developing enlightenment – a situation that questions the meaning of enlightenment itself. On the origins of the *auto-da-fé*, Voltaire writes: 'Ce Torquemada, dominicain, devenu cardinal, donna au Tribunal de l'Inquisition espagnole cette forme juridique opposée à toutes les lois humaines, laquelle s'est toujours conservée' (1756). The supposedly 'civilized' Christians' juridical right to judge others fails the test of universal morality. The false logic of right concocted through the devious activities of the Spanish rulers, Ferdinand and Isabella, conceals the combination of hypocrisy, brutality and pragmatic greed. Reference to human sacrifices supposedly performed by other peoples exposes the greater barbarity of the Christians: 'Tout ce qu'on nous raconte des peuples qui ont sacrifié des hommes à la Divinité n'approche pas de ces exécutions accompagnées de cérémonies religieuses' (1756). The device of the outsider's viewpoint confers objectivity: 'Un Asiatique qui arriverait à Madrid le jour d'une telle exécution ne saurait si c'est une réjouissance, une fête religieuse, un sacrifice, ou une boucherie; c'est tout cela ensemble' (1756). Voltaire indicates that hypocrisy leads the Christians

to criticize others for the very savagery which they fail to recognize in themselves. They falsely or exaggeratedly report the deeds of others in order to justify or mask their own immoral actions. He conflates his argument with the question of what distinguishes the civilized from the savage: 'On reprochait à Montezuma d'immoler des captifs à ses dieux: qu'aurait-il dit s'il avait vu un *auto-da-fé*?' (1756).⁵⁷¹

Voltaire proposes that, following the Reformation, possible benefits might have come to the Church of Rome, 'mais on n'en a versé que plus de sang, et les querelles des théologiens sont devenues des guerres de cannibales' (1761). This attack embraces the central tenet of the Catholic faith; the presence of Christ's body at the Mass. In a later addition to the text, he reduces that issue to the level of the mundanely absurd or irrelevant, thereby further diminishing the significance of the sacrament itself: 'Ainsi, tandis que ceux qu'on appelait *papistes* mangeaient Dieu sans pain, les luthériens mangeaient du pain, et Dieu. Les calvinistes vinrent bientôt après, qui mangèrent le pain, et qui ne mangèrent point Dieu' (1769). For Voltaire, belief in transsubstantiation becomes a mere superstition beyond the imaginings even of the peoples of early history; he writes sarcastically: 'Nous lisons dans Cicéron que les hommes, qui ont épuisé toutes les superstitions, ne sont point parvenus encore à celle de manger leurs dieux, et que c'est la seule absurdité qui leur manque' (1765). This figure reappears in a different form in a later addition to a passage in the *Essai sur les mœurs* where Voltaire reports an alleged conversation between a Mexican cacique and a Spanish captain to whom he had presented some slaves and some edible game. The former says: 'Si tu es dieu [...] voilà des hommes, mange-les; si tu es homme, voilà des vivres que ces esclaves t'apprêteront' (1761); the argument is that while the Christians eat their God, in other religions God eats man, and although for Voltaire both are examples of savagery, the first is the more absurd.⁵⁷²

In the *Essai* Voltaire readopts the figure of the allegedly heretical Muslims to demolish the supposedly reasonable behaviour of Christ's followers. The latter, despite the development of their intellectual and political powers, have become ever more savage, while 'à mesure que les mahométans devinrent puissants, ils se

⁵⁷¹ *Essai sur les mœurs*, II, 119, 350, 351.

⁵⁷² *Essai sur les mœurs*, II, 284, 286; I, 67; II, 393.

polirent' (1756).⁵⁷³ He repeatedly demonstrates how the Europeans have in the social sphere developed their *génie*, to the point of becoming more reasonable and gentle in their behaviour, but constantly depicts the Christian spirit as driven by an ambition that, when charged with religious enthusiasm, makes them forget all charitable beneficence. Speaking for those of the West, Voltaire concludes: 'nous voulons passer pour tolérants; que nous sommes encore loin, mes chers frères, de mériter ce beau titre!' (1768).⁵⁷⁴ To dismantle the argument of European superiority, Voltaire moves the idealized centre away from the authorities of the established Church to those followers of Christ widely perceived as outsiders: the Anabaptists, the forefathers of the Quakers. These 'ont été le contraire des chrétiens; ceux-ci furent d'abord des frères paisibles, souffrants et cachés, et enfin des scélérats absurdes et barbares'. He then concludes: 'Les anabaptistes commencèrent par la barbarie, et ont fini par la douceur et la sagesse' (1775). He creates a negative figure of regression around the representation of the recognized Church, reintroducing a dual interpretation of the progress of man in the 'modern' Christian world. To illustrate another aspect of the rift between Christian dogmatism and progressive tolerance, he refers to an alternative historical paradigm: while fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Italy flourished, 'les disputes de religion qui agitèrent les esprits en Allemagne, dans le Nord, en France, et en Angleterre, retardèrent les progrès de la raison au lieu de les hâter: des aveugles qui combattaient avec fureur ne pouvaient trouver le chemin de la vérité' (1756). By demonstrating that intolerance existed in countries now renowned for their tolerance, Voltaire shows how all groups can at times submit to violence and unreason; it is only when they put aside their religious fanaticism that they can reach a position beneficial to the society as a whole. If we take these references into the wider context, Voltaire's point becomes clearer: despite man's repeated reversals to savagery, progress from his brutal past into a more tolerant future remains possible; if religious fanaticism is rejected, there is hope for all – Christian, Jew, or other – to leave behind their savage past and to work towards a better future.⁵⁷⁵

⁵⁷³ *Essai sur les mœurs*, I, 214.

⁵⁷⁴ *Sermon prêché à Bâle*, p.585.

⁵⁷⁵ *Essai sur les mœurs*, II, 303, 249.

Voltaire emphasizes that if man wishes to achieve a better future, he must learn to reason for himself, and to be responsible for his own actions and thinking. It is only by individuals taking that responsibility that those authorities who seek to abuse their position will be controlled. In the *Lettres philosophiques* he separates the non-fanaticism of enlightened thinkers from the enthusiasm of religious bodies: he marks out the former's rejection of dogmatism and contrasts it with the savage zeal of the latter; he points to the modest behaviour of men such as Newton and Locke, while decrying the aggressive fervour of the followers of Luther, Calvin and Zwingli who 'founded sects that divided Europe' (1734).⁵⁷⁶ By tracing the history of the Jesuits from Saint Ignatius, through Saint Francis Xavier, to their missionary activities in Japan, Voltaire sets out his understanding of religious enthusiasm, starkly drawing attention to how it can decline into uncontrolled brutality.

Enfin l'enthousiasme devient si épidémique qu'ils forment au Japon ce qu'ils appellent une *chrétienté*. Cette chrétienté finit par une guerre civile et par cent mille hommes égorgés: l'enthousiasme alors est parvenu à son dernier degré, qui est le fanatisme, et ce fanatisme est devenu rage. (1771)⁵⁷⁷

For Voltaire, the deterioration of credulity into religious fanaticism conflates with his figure of blasphemy and the false ascription of brutality to the will of God. Pointing to the paradox, he writes: 'Enfin le superstitieux devient fanatique, et c'est alors que son zèle est capable de tous les crimes au nom du Seigneur' (1767).⁵⁷⁸ To the poison spread by such religious enthusiasm, Voltaire finds only one remedy: 'L'esprit philosophique, qui n'est autre chose que la raison, est devenu chez tous les honnêtes gens le seul antidote dans ces maladies épidémiques' (1771).⁵⁷⁹ And declaring that 'la chose la plus rare est de joindre la raison avec l'enthousiasme', he exposes the difficulty for religion and reason to

⁵⁷⁶ *Lettres philosophiques*, I, 80.

⁵⁷⁷ 'Enthousiasme', M.xviii, p.553 (originally in the *Questions sur l'Encyclopédie*).

⁵⁷⁸ *Homélies prononcées à Londres*, p.457.

⁵⁷⁹ 'Confession', M.xviii, p.231 (originally in the *Questions sur l'Encyclopédie*).

live together: 'la raison consiste à voir toujours les choses comme elles sont' (1765).⁵⁸⁰ This repeats his contention, as laid down more than thirty years earlier: 'Il ne m'appartient que de penser humainement; les théologiens décident divinement, c'est tout autre chose: la raison et la foi sont de nature contraire' (1738).⁵⁸¹ But, as Katz shows, there is a pungency in Voltaire's own discourse, one that although ever eschewing violence, is forcefully directed against every perceived act of fanaticism, every perpetrator of intolerance. Insisting on the need for honesty in what he and his colleagues express, Voltaire writes to Marmontel: 'J'ai dit très librement ce que je pensais, parce que je ne pouvais dire ce que je ne pensais pas' (12 April 1764).⁵⁸² And to Damilaville he declares: 'J'ai tout examiné sans passion et sans intérêt; j'ai toujours dit ce que j'ai pensé, et je ne connais aucun cas dans lequel il faille dire ce qu'on ne pense point' (26 March 1764); here speaks the voice of a self-aware intelligence making every effort to set aside the passion and self-interest which motivate even our altruistic deeds.⁵⁸³ But, although Voltaire claims to be coolly uninterested, his writing gives repeated evidence of his obsessive determination to redress an imbalance that he finds exists between the passion of religious fanatics and the passivity of many moderate thinkers. Even while his discourse attempts to present an objective picture, it is marked by this deliberate strategy to inspire his fellow *philosophes* into action against the enemies of enlightenment. Understanding the problem that exists in the combat against the 'monster' of fanaticism, he asks: 'Faut-il rester oisif dans les ténèbres? ou faut-il allumer un flambeau auquel l'envie et la calomnie rallumeront leurs torches?' He recognizes that in encouraging people to stand firm against intolerance he risks inciting them to similar acts; he accepts that those fighting fanaticism need to direct their followers on a course between the Scylla and Charybdis of 'fatal indifference' and savage fanaticism. But, despite the danger that one's own actions might stir up further extremism, might reawaken 'quelques têtes de cette hydre du fanatisme', he concludes: 'Pour moi, je crois que la vérité ne doit pas plus se cacher devant ces monstres, que l'on ne doit s'abstenir de

⁵⁸⁰ 'Enthousiasme', VF, p.60.

⁵⁸¹ *Lettres philosophiques*, I, 192.

⁵⁸² D11821.

⁵⁸³ D11798.

prendre de la nourriture dans la crainte d'être empoisonné' (1766).⁵⁸⁴

Although understanding the pernicious effect of fanaticism, and even while professing the need for a balance between excessive enthusiasm and apathy, Voltaire, does not allow for a lukewarm approach in his fight against brutal extremism. Despite his constant fear of his enemies, in his desire to *écraser l'infâme*, he condemns 'la prudente lâcheté' (22 June 1766), insisting that against the opponents of tolerance there is little place for insipid resistance: the *philosophes* must be 'zealous disciples' to their cause (25 August 1766).⁵⁸⁵ He declares: 'Je ne peux plus que faire des vœux pour la tolérance. Il me paraît qu'il n'y en a plus guère dans le monde. Les ennemis sont ardents, et les fidèles sont tièdes' (18 January 1764).⁵⁸⁶ He concludes *Le Dîner du Comte de Boulainvilliers* with the comment: 'N'est-il pas honteux que les fanatiques aient du zèle et que les sages n'en aient pas? Il faut être prudent, mais non pas timide' (1767).⁵⁸⁷ In the same vein he comments regretfully: 'Le nombre de ceux qui pensent est excessivement petit, et ceux-là ne s'avisent pas de troubler le monde' (1738).⁵⁸⁸ Thus, when writing to Damilaville regarding the Calas and Sirven affairs, he concludes his letter with the words: 'vous êtes un homme selon mon cœur; votre zèle est égal à votre raison; je hais les tièdes. [...] Ecr. l'inf., Ecr: l'inf: vous dis-je' (15 March 1765).⁵⁸⁹

Voltaire seeks to underline the separation between the claims of religious enthusiasts and the reality of their actions, and to show how the growth of superstitious fervour in people serves to diminish their charitable feeling for others. He writes: 'Plus le superstitieux se concentre dans des pratiques et dans des croyances absurdes, plus il a d'indifférence pour les vrais devoirs de l'humanité' (1767).⁵⁹⁰ Reiterating this view when corresponding with Louise Honorine Crozat du Châtel, Voltaire makes further reference to the widespread absence of moderation between the extremes of excessive enthusiasm and apathetic indifference:

⁵⁸⁴ *Le Philosophe ignorant*, pp.104-05.

⁵⁸⁵ D13369 to Comte and Comtesse d'Argental; D13513 to Damilaville.

⁵⁸⁶ D11651 to Damilaville.

⁵⁸⁷ *Le Dîner du Comte de Boulainvilliers*, p.408.

⁵⁸⁸ *Lettres philosophiques*, I, 202.

⁵⁸⁹ D12462.

Je n'ai pu encore à mon âge m'accoutumer à l'indifférence et à la légèreté avec laquelle des personnes d'esprit traitent la seule chose essentielle. Je ne m'accoutume pas plus aux sottises énormes dans lesquelles le fanatisme plonge tous les jours des têtes qui d'ailleurs n'ont pas perdu absolument le sens commun sur les choses ordinaires de la vie. Ces deux contrastes m'étonnent encore tous les jours. (2 September 1770)⁵⁹¹

Six years earlier, his letter to d'Alembert suggests that he considers his endeavour to find a path between these poles has not been entirely successful; he writes: 'On a très longtemps examiné, en composant l'ouvrage ['Tolérance'], s'il fallait s'en tenir à prêcher simplement l'indulgence et la charité, ou si l'on devait ne pas craindre d'inspirer de l'indifférence' (13 February 1764). In his programme against fanaticism Voltaire marks out a clear separation between a tolerant indifference such as that manifested by the *philosophes* in matters of religious belief, and a passive apathy that allows for the perpetration of savage intolerance by others. As in the case of enthusiasm, he points to a distinction, one that, in this case, exists between a negative lack of concern or involvement in matters of social injustice, and a positive, philosophic openness to choice or questioning.⁵⁹² Frédéric Deloffre sums up Voltaire's aim in the *Lettres philosophiques*:

Le motif fondamental est la tolérance [...]. Mais Voltaire vise un but plus caché et plus important à ses yeux: il s'agit pour lui de créer dans l'opinion un état d'indifférence, voire de mépris à l'égard de la religion, en suggérant que l'incrédulité l'emporte sur la 'superstition' dans tous les domaines.⁵⁹³

Deloffre specifically identifies religious indifference, an attitude close to agnosticism, in which the individual simply does not ask himself any questions about the divine; this attitude is a favourable ground for tolerance to all religious and other differences. In other words, the same term 'indifference' has two separate significations. Voltaire constantly stresses that religious indifference must not be confused with that other apathetic indifference for another's suffering. In

⁵⁹¹ D16626.

⁵⁹² D11695.

⁵⁹³ *Lettres philosophiques* (1986), p.8.

the *Homélie prononcées à Londres* he rejects indifference to humanitarian questions:

Ne dites pas qu'en prêchant la tolérance nous prêchons l'indifférence. Non, mes frères; celui qui adore Dieu et qui fait du bien aux hommes n'est point indifférent. Ce nom convient bien davantage au superstitieux qui pense que Dieu lui saura gré d'avoir proféré des formules inintelligibles, tandis qu'il est en effet très indifférent sur le sort de son frère qu'il laisse périr sans secours, ou qu'il abandonne dans la disgrâce, ou qu'il flatte dans la prospérité, ou qu'il persécute s'il est d'une autre secte, s'il est sans appui et sans protection. (1767)⁵⁹⁴

Although Voltaire does not deny that people may be good, he contends that they are too often also weak and cowardly: 'Un des grands malheurs des honnêtes gens c'est qu'ils sont des lâches. On gémit, on se tait, on soupe, on oublie' (c.10 August 1766).⁵⁹⁵ Repeatedly he stresses the way people seek to shield themselves from reality, to blank out truths that they do not want to know – they take refuge in mindless activities or lighthearted diversion. But, worse still, when people do not think for themselves, unwittingly they can be drawn into a participation in acts of fanaticism: the evidence of this becomes manifest by the public's presence at the *auto-da-fé*. Voltaire denounces the way people submit to 'des opinions fantastiques, qui conduisent les âmes faibles à un enthousiasme destructeur et aux plus détestables atrocités' (1766), and, again accusing those whom he sees as most at fault in the propagation of such unthinking fanaticism, he writes: 'Vous connaissez [...] à quel excès la populace porte la crédulité et le fanatisme, toujours encouragé par les moines' (1766).⁵⁹⁶ The criticism has a double target: while again it allows Voltaire to show the authorities' responsibility for behaviour contrary to the universal morality, it also exposes the fault of submissive people who have allowed themselves to be manipulated, who have passively failed to stand up for the right. In his letter to the Comte and Comtesse d'Argental, where he expresses his horror at the execution of the young La Barre, he bitterly questions the role played by the spectators at the event:

⁵⁹⁴ *Homélie prononcées à Londres*, p.460.

⁵⁹⁵ D13485 to d'Alembert.

⁵⁹⁶ *Avis au public*, p.531; *Relation de la mort du Chevalier de La Barre*, p.506.

Est il possible que le peuple l'ait soufferte? L'homme en général est un animal bien lâche; il voit tranquillement dévorer son prochain, et semble content pouvu qu'on ne le dévore pas; il regarde encore ces boucheries avec le plaisir de la curiosité. (23 July 1766)⁵⁹⁷

Adopting an animal metaphor, such as he frequently uses in order to expose the instability of mankind's claim to superiority over other creatures, he declares: 'Pour moi je mourrai bientôt, et ce sera en détestant le pays des singes et des tigres où la folie de ma mère me fit naître il y a bientôt soixante et treize ans' (c.10 August 1766).⁵⁹⁸ And, he continues, because so many people submit to the actions of fanatics, the latter enforce their domination:

on est arrêté par mille liens, on demeure tranquillement sous le glaive, exposé non seulement aux fureurs des méchants, mais à leurs railleries. Les fanatiques triomphent. [...] Cela est aussi honteux pour l'humanité que l'infâme persécution qui nous opprime. (18 August 1766)⁵⁹⁹

Despite the oppression that victims suffer, they cannot blame others entirely for their treatment: they have to accept that, to some degree, they have a responsibility for the world in which they find themselves. Voltaire contends that any resistance, however feeble, is preferable to none: 'Les cris ne sont pas inutiles; ils effrayent les animaux carnassiers au moins pour quelque temps' (19 July 1766).⁶⁰⁰

Condemning all examples of laziness of mind, the idleness that allows unthinking individuals to accept actions, customs, and dogmas without consideration, Voltaire ridicules the blind and unquestioning nature of those who, through faith, become victims of the hypocritical machinations of the people in authority. To illustrate this, he creates a comparison between followers of the ancient cults of Apollo and Diana, and those 'paysans grossiers' of his day, underlining their apparently common tendency to give in to unreasoning behaviour:

Une populace grossière et superstitieuse qui ne raisonnait point, qui ne savait ni douter, ni

⁵⁹⁷ D13441.

⁵⁹⁸ D13485 to d'Alembert.

⁵⁹⁹ D13500 to Damilaville.

⁶⁰⁰ D13431 to Damilaville.

nier, ni croire, qui courait aux temples par oisiveté, et parce que les petits y sont égaux aux grands, qui portait son offrande par coutume, qui parlait continuellement de miracles sans en avoir examiné aucun, et qui n'était guère au-dessus des victimes qu'elle amenait; cette populace, dis-je, pouvait bien [...] être frappée d'une horreur religieuse, et adorer, sans le savoir, la statue même. (composed 1756: published 1764)⁶⁰¹

In such unthinking people, there is no limit to which their gullibility will not extend, and Voltaire condemns such credulity by declaring that it is 'la marque la plus infaillible de l'ignorance' (1735-52).⁶⁰² Men and women prove themselves to be superior to animals, not by spiritual election, but by their choosing to be thinking beings who have the power to reason. In the comedy, *Nanine*, Voltaire reiterates this view:

Il faut être homme, et d'une âme sensée

Avoir à soi ses goûts et sa pensée.

[...]

Le singe est né pour être imitateur,

Et l'homme doit agir d'après son cœur.

(1749)⁶⁰³

Voltaire sees it as man's duty to make use of that reason informed by the heart, that 'présent que le Créateur a fait à ces êtres que nous nommons pensants' (1748-51).⁶⁰⁴ Accordingly, in the *Epître au roi de Danemark*, he gives credit to the king for the manner in which he rules, writing: 'Tu rends ses droits à l'homme, et tu permets qu'on pense.' To this he then adds that 'au mortel qui pense on doit la liberté' (1770).⁶⁰⁵

As a man of his times, Voltaire does not seek a society built on egalitarian social ideas, and contends that, since talents and abilities are not equal, society has to be conducted according to a hierarchical order at the head of which should sit

⁶⁰¹ 'Idole, idolâtre, idolâtrie', p.211.

⁶⁰² *Le Siècle de Louis XIV*, I, 174.

⁶⁰³ *Nanine*, p.83.

⁶⁰⁴ *Lettres philosophiques*, I, 210.

⁶⁰⁵ *Epître au roi de Danemark*, p.424, p.432.

an enlightened ruler.

Ceux qui disent que tous les hommes sont égaux disent la plus grande vérité, s'ils entendent que tous les hommes ont un droit égal à la liberté, à la propriété de leurs biens, à la protection des lois. Ils se tromperaient beaucoup s'ils croyaient que les hommes doivent être égaux par les emplois, puisqu'ils ne le sont point par leurs talents. (1761)

While he acknowledges that in society differences will always exist, at the same time he insists that certain essential rights should be accorded to all human beings. This he conflates with the question of social utility: by means of his satirical declaration that the 'necessary inequality' at the heart of the establishment of the nobility in Europe has been unequalled, he reintroduces his often repeated condemnation of the useless idleness of the aristocracy.⁶⁰⁶

In the *Lettres philosophiques* Voltaire asks rhetorically which is the more useful to the state, 'un seigneur bien poudré qui sait précisément à quelle heure le Roi se lève, à quelle heure il se couche [...], ou un négociant qui enrichit son pays [...] et contribue au bonheur du monde' (1734), a question which in the *Essai sur les mœurs* he then answers by praising 'le roturier utile qui paie la taille', and by condemning 'cette multiplicité ridicule de nobles sans fonction et sans vraie noblesse' (1761). These so-called nobles who pay 'nothing to the state' fail to contribute to the world in which they live: they exist as mere parasites of society. Through this argument, which links with that so often levelled against those in enclosed religious orders, Voltaire takes us back to the question of the duality of man's responsibilities and rights: all people should seek to serve their fellows, to be useful to their community, and all people deserve to be treated as human beings that have the potential to think for themselves. As the two elements are reverse sides of the same coin, any claim made to just one part of this duality is unjust and it diminishes the authority of the other: a failure to recognize one's responsibilities partially dismantles the moral basis on which one's rights are founded.⁶⁰⁷

The rights owing to mankind include humane treatment, kindness and beneficence, and the fundamental freedoms of all people: the freedom from the

⁶⁰⁶ *Essai sur les mœurs*, II, 134.

⁶⁰⁷ *Lettres philosophiques*, I, 122; *Essai sur les mœurs*, II, 141.

confiscation of personal property, and the freedom from persecution. But greatest of all for Voltaire is the freedom of thought which enables people to think for themselves. This allows them to rise above their environment, to avoid the manipulation of others, and to resist their own apathetic acceptance of injustice. Freedom of thought and the quality of human kindness define, not the human animal, but man himself, and therefore all people have a responsibility to conserve these 'deux biens qui appartiennent essentiellement à l'homme' (1768).⁶⁰⁸ Voltaire therefore declares that thinking for ourselves should become a *régime* that we should strive to adopt (1766).⁶⁰⁹ But, recognizing that enlightenment itself can be abused, that man's God-given gift of reason can be put to bad use, he expresses the wish that his thoughts and actions might be 'dignes de ce pouvoir qui m'a fait naître' (1767).⁶¹⁰

By his being *pensant*, a person moves from an existence as a mere creature in human form to a life in which he attains his full potential. The human being defined solely by his physical body and inward-looking nature, becomes fully humanized when he has humanity, that metaphysical quality which causes individuals to look outwards and to question universal problems common to all mankind. For Voltaire, humanity is to be discovered when the most humane soul combines an understanding of justice and virtue: 'C'est en qualité d'êtres pensants que nous connaissons le juste et l'injuste' (1767).⁶¹¹ The distinction between those who think and those who do not now has a further implication of deservedness; Voltaire comments: 'il faut traiter en êtres pensants ceux qui pensent, comme on traite les brutes en brutes' (1760).⁶¹² The latter constitute the unthinking members of the human race, the people who, like animals, are incapable of acting as responsible, reasoning and useful members of their group; the former are those individuals who are of service to all fellow human beings and to society at large. Desiring to undo the negative effects that fanaticism brings about in others, Voltaire aims to 'changer en hommes utiles, des sujets qu'on a rendu des bêtes

⁶⁰⁸ *Sermon prêché à Bâle*, p.590.

⁶⁰⁹ *Avis au public*, p.535.

⁶¹⁰ *Homélies prononcées à Londres*, p.445.

⁶¹¹ *Homélies prononcées à Londres*, p.436.

⁶¹² *Réflexions pour les sots*, p.121.

inutiles' (18 November 1758).⁶¹³ But at the end of his life he accepts that apathy and fanaticism still exist, that there is still a 'multitude effroyable de gueux qui déshonorent la nature humaine utile à elle-même et à l'État' (1777). These comments show how he extends the notion of utility from its role in a limited practical domain, to the wider philosophical field.⁶¹⁴

By translating Voltaire's point from the area of the universal to the particular, we can apply the two elements of his discourse to the religious groups under discussion in this thesis: on one hand, he portrays the Christians as guilty of intolerant enthusiasm, of failing to show humanity and reason, on the other, he depicts the unresisting Jews as partially deserving of their misfortune. In his view, the latter are at fault, not just because they continue with their unquestioning faith in the Judaic teachings, but also because they accept without opposition the role that the Christian world has accorded to them. They collaborate with the common understanding of their identity, the negative inflation imposed on them by the rest of society: they carry 'the collective shadow of heroic Western consciousness', an 'abject identification with an acceptable persona'. In this instance, once more Voltaire taps into the stereotypical fantasy, accusing the Jews of a weakness held to be partly responsible for their treatment. But this very argument contains an essential difference from the common prejudice, one that separates it from the polarized thinking of the antisemite: Voltaire softens his criticism of the Jews by levelling his charge, not just at them, but also at his fellow members of Christendom. Christians too must accept their share of blame, not just for causing the Jews' non-resistance by the way they persecute them, but also for repeating the latter's behaviour by continuing in their unthinking acceptance of the 'illogical' biblical texts.⁶¹⁵

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⁶¹³ D7946 to Antoine Jean Gabriel Le Bault.

⁶¹⁴ *Prix de la justice*, p.536.

⁶¹⁵ Sylvia Brinton Perera, *The Scapegoat Complex*, p.52.

Charges of Jewish credulity and non-reasoning

While Voltaire condemns misplaced pride in all people, he particularly levels this attack against the Jews, and thus he extends his condemnation of the Jewish claim of divine election. He declares:

L'orgueil de chaque juif est intéressé à croire que ce n'est point sa détestable politique, son ignorance des arts, sa grossièreté qui l'a perdu; mais que c'est la colère de Dieu qui le punit. Il pense avec satisfaction qu'il a fallu des miracles pour l'abattre, et que sa nation est toujours la bien-aimée du Dieu qui la châtie. (1734)⁶¹⁶

Again presenting Jewish pride in abasement as misplaced, wrongly founded on the notion of chosenness, and as a primary cause of their sufferings, he carries his condemnation over into the present: the Jews continue to believe themselves to be the chosen people of God, and their persisting credulity gives proof, for Voltaire, of their failure to apply their reason.

He then conflates the figure of mental apathy with utility. When scornfully attributing to the Jews mere calculating skills, Voltaire draws a distinction between their productive, mechanical usefulness and the philosophical usefulness of others. In his portrayal of the Jews' role in the commercial world, he varies his representation to fit the argument of the moment, at times showing them as potentially valuable members of society, at others drawing a negative picture of their financial expertise. But in his comment of 1771 he expresses concern as to the greater worth of the Jews, suggesting that not until they begin to question the recorded truths of their religion and to engage in the deeper issues of the world will their usefulness to mankind move from a purely practical field to one in which they can play a role in improving the lot of all people: only then will they become really useful citizens. But, while Poliakov finds that here Voltaire has tapped into the antisemitic fantasy which finds a lasting Jewish essence of non-reason, I would argue that the discourse in this period refutes this charge and indicates another objective; Voltaire targets the Jews, not because he sees them as incapable of enlightenment, but because (in his mind) they do not strive enough to

⁶¹⁶ *Lettres philosophiques*, II, 195-96.

attain their true potential. I contend that his programme at this time is not one affirming the permanent marginalization of the Jews, but rather one expressing the possibility that eventually they may arrive at (what he sees as) a more fulfilling future.

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Sermon des cinquante

But in the more negative atmosphere of the *Sermon des cinquante*, attacking the Jews, he exclaims: ‘contentons-nous de déplorer l’aveuglement le plus à plaindre qui ait jamais offusqué la raison humaine.’ In this instance, he denies to them a full ability to reason, so that even when he concedes that they eventually developed a belief in the immortality of the soul, he reduces this with the comment that ‘la raison n’en perça pas davantage chez le misérable peuple’. On this occasion Voltaire allows himself to blur together all Jews of the past – the people of the ancient Bible with those of early historical times – in their united foolishness, a figure that by implication includes believers of his own day who still revere Judaic teachings. His satire intensifies to represent ‘la nation chérie’ as governed by God himself, before proceeding to undermine this figure by his representation of the Supreme Being ‘irritated’ by the apparent humanity of Saul who wished to spare Agag – an episode that gives him further example of the blasphemous nature of the biblical texts. By this manoeuvre that, through reversal, implies the inhumane nature of God (the very opposite of that to which human beings should aspire), Voltaire diminishes the authority of the Jews’ deity. And, through introducing this episode into a more contemporary context, by creating a hypothetical parallel event relating to the Emperor Charles V and François I^{er} of France, Voltaire is able to expose the ludicrous aspect of this biblical account that denies the true worth of Saul’s humane nature, and upholds Samuel’s subsequent butchery as sacred. Ridiculing such obedience to a god, whose rejection of true humanity denigrates the faith of those who honour him, Voltaire proposes that the alleged pride of the Jewish people in their religion proves itself totally unfounded.⁶¹⁷

⁶¹⁷ *Sermon des cinquante*, p.448, p.449, pp.442-43.

In the *Sermon des cinquante* his highly critical attack endeavours to deny that the Jews' obedience to their laws is a mark of strength and loyalty: he refers to their dietary restrictions in a mocking figure that also serves to demean Christianity. Describing Christ's miracle of casting out demons and transposing them into a herd of pigs, he comments sarcastically, 'on peut croire que les maîtres de ces cochons, qui apparemment n'étaient pas juifs, ne furent pas contents de cette farce' – a figure that connects with that of *Le Dîner du Comte de Boulainvilliers*, where the text throws doubt on the idea that such animals should be found 'dans un pays où il n'y avait point de cochons' (1767). By again making reference to these mundane practicalities or incongruities, Voltaire diminishes the significance given to all religious fasting, and demolishes the standing of the texts held as sacred by both Jews and Christians. Through the use of bathos he reduces the relevance of their religious teachings as a whole.⁶¹⁸

The *Sermon des cinquante* opens with a prayer in which Voltaire contends that true submission to God and the absence of superstition are the only requests that man should make to the 'Dieu de tous les globes et de tous les êtres', a statement that intentionally exposes the alleged claims of the Jews, who, according to Voltaire, see God not as 'le père de tous les hommes, mais de [leur] seule famille' (1772).⁶¹⁹ Presenting the Old Testament as 'littered with unheard-of extravagances' – miracles, false representations and fabulous, unbelievable achievements – he derides the followers of Judaism for (what he sees as) their senseless credulity :

De miracles en miracles nous arrivons jusqu'à Samson, représenté comme un fameux paillard, favori de Dieu; celui-là, parce qu'il n'était pas rasé, défait mille Philistins avec une mâchoire d'âne, et attache par la queue trois cents renards qu'il trouve à point nommé.

Having depicted faith as basing its authority on mere pretexts, Voltaire can then demonstrate how credulity has allowed for the setting up of the very religions that in time have come to cause suffering, not just to their enemies, but also to their followers.⁶²⁰

⁶¹⁸ *Sermon des cinquante*, p.267; *Le Dîner du Comte de Boulainvilliers*, p.372.

⁶¹⁹ *Sermon des cinquante*, p.438; *Il faut prendre un parti*, p.544.

⁶²⁰ *Sermon des cinquante*, p.447, p.446.

However, on a more positive note, in the final stages of the *Sermon des cinquante* Voltaire suggests that the credulous nature of all unthinking believers may be about to pass. The foolishness of the Bible's man-made dogma had been preceded by the patriarchs' simple faith in one God; as that foolishness belonged to a mere stage of unreason, with progress people might easily come to accept a reasonable faith once more.

Il faut avoir le courage de faire encore quelques pas: le peuple n'est pas si imbécile qu'on le pense; il recevra sans peine un culte sage et simple d'un Dieu unique, tel qu'on nous dit qu'Abraham et Noé le professaient, tel que tous les sages de l'antiquité l'ont professé, tel qu'il est reçu à la Chine par tous les lettrés.

In this instance, even if we have to question Voltaire's sincerity in his reference to the patriarchs, he draws a connection between the early biblical fathers and the people of China whom he constantly commends. Moreover, by indicating the possibility of the existence of a 'wise and simple cult' before the introduction of later Jewish teachings, Voltaire now draws a distinction between the Jewish people of different periods; he shows that, as with all groups, among them too there may be found contradictory cycles of ignorance and enlightenment. This proposition opens out his argument, in that it negates the charge of foolishness as a permanent essence of the Jews, and – by his removing from them such a lasting and particularized character of religious unreason – he unites them with the universal. This passage denotes a comparable movement within the *Sermon des cinquante* itself. Now, in its conclusion, the pamphlet appears no longer as a mere hallucinatory text, but rather as part of Voltaire's deist programme to promote man's use of his reason; at the last moment, in its drive towards the objective of the propagation of tolerance, it too offers hope for a better future to all people who can open their minds to less dogmatic thinking.⁶²¹

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⁶²¹ *Sermon des cinquante*, p.453.

‘Juifs’

In ‘Juifs’, referring again to the Jews, Voltaire claims that:

Ils sont le dernier de tous les peuples parmi les musulmans et les chrétiens, et ils se croient le premier. Cet orgueil dans leur abaissement est justifié par une raison sans réplique: c’est qu’ils sont réellement les pères des chrétiens et des musulmans. (1756)

While indicating that the reason for their conceit is irrefutable, he reverses his point by satirically implying that the heritage of Judaism renders pride impossible. He compares this misplaced thinking in Judaism to that of a mother with two children. He writes: ‘Mais quelque mauvais traitement qu’elle en ait reçus, elle ne laisse pas de se glorifier de leur avoir donné la naissance’ (undated). The illogical aspect of Jewish pride introduces the figure of Jewish responsibility for the actions of the religions that have followed in the path of Judaism: in the *Sermon des cinquante* he refers to Judaism’s record as the worthy prelude, the worthy example to all other religious persecutions. In the final section of ‘Juifs’ Voltaire draws a link between the Jews and Christians: ‘Vous fûtes des monstres de cruauté et de fanatisme en Palestine, nous l’avons été dans notre Europe’ (1771).⁶²² But in this later instance he emphasizes the equal blame of both groups, and suggests not a causal continuity, but a parity between them. He makes this comparison in a letter to d’Alembert, but goes on to suggest that the Christians might learn from the Jews: ‘Or, si, les tigres et les loups de la Palestine se sont adoucis quelquefois, je propose aux singes, mes compatriotes, de ne pas toujours mordre et de se contenter de danser’ (1 March 1764). These variations of emphasis show how he proceeds from a negative point to one that is more positive, and then to the realization that we all need to move on from destructive memories.⁶²³ Having spoken of fanaticism, Voltaire exclaims: ‘oublions tout cela, mes amis’ (1771). He calls on us to acknowledge that tolerance can be achieved only by embracing the fact that faults exist in both self and other, and by our voluntary letting go of negative attitudes belonging to the past.⁶²⁴

⁶²² ‘Juifs’, p.512, p.524, p.541.

⁶²³ D11739.

⁶²⁴ ‘Juifs’, p.541.

When considering the question of man's ability to reason, Voltaire foregrounds the foolishness of credulity based on obviously false evidence, and in the case of the Jews, he cites the figure of their food laws, writing:

Il y est défendu de manger de l'anguille, parce qu'elle n'a point d'écailles; ni de lièvre, parce que, dit le *Vaïcra*, le lièvre rumine, et n'a point le pied fendu. Cependant il est vrai que le lièvre a le pied fendu, et ne rumine point; apparemment que les Juifs avaient d'autres lièvres que les nôtres. Le griffon est immonde, les oiseaux à quatre pieds sont immondes; ce sont des animaux un peu rares. (undated)

Mockingly he professes that, since the scriptures cannot be wrong, believers, faced with the evidence of the texts, have to concede that it must be modern science that is ignorant. And this claim, so clearly contrary to reason, allows him, again through reversal, to demolish the veracity of the Bible.⁶²⁵

The same food laws serve at times to dismantle Voltaire's representation of Jewish tolerance, in this instance shown as limited in its application. While, on many other occasions he praises the quality of tolerant religious indifference in the Jews, he now integrates this into the figure of Jewish foolishness; Pharisees and Saducees showed tolerance of others in areas of metaphysical and social importance – whether or not to believe in the afterlife with its beneficial influence on human behaviour – and yet they brutally punished those who broke their laws regarding the clean and the unclean.

Cette prodigieuse différence entre les sentiments de ces deux grands corps ne causa aucun trouble. Les Juifs n'étaient attachés scrupuleusement, dans les derniers temps de leur séjour à Jérusalem, qu'à leurs cérémonies légales. Celui qui aurait mangé du boudin ou du lapin aurait été lapidé; et celui qui niait l'immortalité de l'âme pouvait être grand-prêtre. (1756)⁶²⁶

Voltaire endeavours to undermine the Jews' claim that their laws are God-given by emphasizing their man-made particularity, and this enables him to show how brutal intolerance committed in the name of such laws represents a supreme form

⁶²⁵ 'Juifs', p.522.

⁶²⁶ 'Juifs', p.519.

of foolishness. For him, this example of the Jews' supposed unreason in (what he sees as) irrelevant matters – set against their embracing of differences regarding more serious philosophical issues – gives resonance to his allegation of illogicality in the Jews. But, although the Pharisees and Saducees were, for him, foolish in their understanding of what was important and what was not, in matters relating to the religious, they showed tolerance. In the 'Lettre sur Mr Locke', Voltaire refers to these cases where they did not persecute each other, did not 'trouble the government', and exclaims: 'O misérables hommes, profitez de ces exemples! Pensez et laissez penser' (1748-51).⁶²⁷ More significantly still, in a later passage Voltaire asks: 'ceux qui se feraient un scrupule de communiquer avec les religions étrangères, ceux-là ne méritent-ils pas le titre d'ennemis du genre humain?' (1767).⁶²⁸ We can interpret these comments by displacement as implying that, by virtue of their religious tolerance, the Jews of more modern times, unlike many Christians, deserve their place among those humane members of mankind who are prepared to embrace the difference of others. This reverses the figure of the Jews as able merely to calculate.

These episodes give further evidence of Voltaire's manipulation of his figures, his selectiveness in choosing examples of Jewish actions; when he finds the facts do not support the argument, he diminishes the relevance of what does not fit, often by recourse to mockery. Accordingly, his open acknowledgement of the tolerance of the victimized Jews of more recent times relates to his deliberate emphasis on the failings of the all-powerful Christians; he uses the two figures to drive forward his programme for the rejection of intolerance.

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Essai sur les mœurs and La Philosophie de l'histoire

In *La Philosophie de l'histoire*, contending that the Jews have hated and been hated throughout the ages, Voltaire conflates the figure of unjustified conceit and lack of questioning with one of uncontrolled barbarity and fanaticism brought on by an absence of *la morale*; the 'little Jewish nation', rampant in its misfortune,

⁶²⁷ *Lettres philosophiques*, I, 213.

⁶²⁸ *Homélies prononcées à Londres*, p.474.

prides itself on its unworthy actions:

Elle se vante elle-même d'être sortie d'Égypte comme une horde de voleurs, emportant tout ce qu'elle avait emprunté des Égyptiens; elle fait gloire de n'avoir jamais épargné ni la vieillesse, ni le sexe, ni l'enfance, dans les villages et dans le bourgs dont elle a pu s'emparer. Elle ose étaler une haine irréconciliable contre toutes les autres nations; elle se révolte contre tous ses maîtres. (1765)⁶²⁹

Believing that God has deigned to accord them a chosen status, the Jews are content to submit unquestioningly to the suffering that has resulted from that special nature, to see God's hand in everything that befalls them. Thus Voltaire suggests that their initial misconception was based on ignorance, while their later adherence to the idea of their chosenness and victim status has been marked by stubborn foolishness and a resistance to reason:

Quand leurs yeux furent un peu ouverts par d'autres nations victorieuses, qui leur apprirent que le monde était plus grand qu'ils ne croyaient, ils se trouvèrent, par leur loi même, ennemis naturels de ces nations, et enfin du genre humain. Leur politique absurde subsista quand elle devait changer; leur superstition augmenta avec leurs malheurs. (1761)⁶³⁰

Representing the Jews' beliefs as grounded on a blind trust in their texts, Voltaire contends that, while credulity is a failing found among all people, they have carried it to extremes: 'Chaque peuple a ses prodiges; mais tout est prodige chez le peuple juif' (1765). Going to extremes himself, he contends that 'si les Juifs, qui espéraient la conquête du monde, ont été presque toujours asservis, ce fut leur faute' (1765). In his eyes, credulity has led to ambition, which has, in turn, led to the Jews' subjection: failure to use their reason has become the primary cause for their suffering; mental apathy is responsible for their status as victims. But Voltaire's message appears more positive when his discourse is viewed as a whole; he shows that, like deprivation and poverty, unthinking indifference need not be lasting, and that among all people passivity, irrationality and unreason can

⁶²⁹ *La Philosophie de l'histoire*, pp.234-35.

⁶³⁰ *Essai sur les mœurs*, II, 164.

be rectified.⁶³¹

How the Jews have been seen or treated by others is then represented in a more recent, and thereby, more real context. Voltaire proposes that when the Inquisition's public burnings took place, the spectators that witnessed them did not feel much horror 'parce que c'étaient leurs anciens ennemis et des Juifs qu'on immolait' (1756). The Jews, according to the opinion of the crowd, are worthy of such treatment; they, in the eyes of the onlookers, have no standing as human beings who deserve the sympathy of others. In this instance, Voltaire's attack focuses on the Christians, both those in authority who carry out the persecution, and the wider public who silently condone such an activity. The perpetrators are guilty for the hypocritical way that they reinterpret Christian charity, the crowd is at fault for their acceptance of such brutality, by their denying to the Jews the rights of all human beings – those fundamental freedoms that Voltaire defines as belonging to all mankind. Through this action, Christians have (by implication) denied the Jews any claim to the universal human status on which those rights are based.⁶³²

* * *

Candide

Religious belonging results from accident or convention that is dictated by time or space; Voltaire parodies this unstable foundation in his portrayal of the ambivalent status of Cunégonde, on designated holy days alternatively the mistress of the Inquisitor and of Don Issachar. Most religious faith comes not from God but is a creation of man, and so its interpretation rests on a changing set of rules dictated by chance. To show that the only solution to this rests in the individual's determination to reason for himself, Voltaire directs his mockery against the very person who purports to instruct others. Pangloss, who chooses to ignore the evidence before his eyes, remains trapped in his unthinking existence, and despite the sufferings he experiences, accepts all these as part of God's greater scheme in 'the best of all possible worlds'. Bowing submissively and unquestioningly to misfortune, he insists on holding to his 'premier sentiment',

⁶³¹ *La Philosophie de l'histoire*, p.222, p.265.

⁶³² *Essai sur les mœurs*, II, 350.

adding that 'il le soutenait toujours, et n'en croyait rien'. Voltaire thus vilifies the way people can deceive themselves and others by proclaiming to adhere to a faith that they no longer believe: cowardice or laziness makes it easier not to question or deny.⁶³³

Pangloss' ready submission to his fate links him with the other unprotesting victims of the *auto-da-fé*. And another comparable figure appears in the person of the black slave, whose pragmatic mother passively collaborates in an abusive system, an action that in the *Essai sur les mœurs* Voltaire bitterly condemns by remarking that 'un peuple qui trafique de ses enfants est encore plus condamnable que l'acheteur' (1756). This parent, by selling her child to enslavement, embraces the favourable interpretation given by the so-called *fétiches* to their actions, their representation of the 'happiness' and 'honour' to be found in slavery to white masters – a figure invested with further negative significance by its implied link to financial gain.⁶³⁴ But the hero, Candide, who has been raised 'à ne jamais juger de rien par lui-même', eventually breaks away from all such unreasoning conduct, and, when able to question and to act independently, becomes a member of society who is useful to his fellows. Voltaire ultimately gives pride of place to the practical; he demonstrates that less benefit comes to society from abstract argument than from productive human labour that improves the lives of others.⁶³⁵

* * *

La Pucelle

When contesting Bayle's argument regarding the supposed atheism of so-called uncivilized peoples, Voltaire represents them as children, remarking that 'un enfant n'est ni athée ni déiste, il n'est rien' (1764).⁶³⁶ In *La Pucelle* this figure marks all blind faith, and becomes embodied in the shape of *Sottise*, the queen of foolishness, who, as the 'vieil enfant' of ignorance, has never learnt to grow up. Indicating the dangers that lurk when reason sleeps, Voltaire re-emphasizes the link between laziness of mind and credulity, writing:

⁶³³ *Candide*, p.251, p.256.

⁶³⁴ *Essai sur les mœurs*, III, 177.

⁶³⁵ *Candide*, p.234.

⁶³⁶ 'Athée, athéisme', p.391.

Près de son trône est sa sotte famille,
 Le fol orgueil, l'opiniâtreté,
 Et la paresse et la crédulité.
 Elle est servie, elle est flattée en reine,
 On la croirait en effet souveraine,
 Mais ce n'est rien qu'un fantôme impuissant.

(1730-62)⁶³⁷

He here calls for a dual effort of determination by all people; first, on the personal level, the rejection of the blind acceptance of illogical teachings, and on the social level, a resistance to those environmental influences that further undermine the individual's ability to think for himself. The positive point behind this discourse is that in all cases of such infantile lack of reason, enlightenment is possible: informing the ignorant is an easier task than curing the fanatic who has much to unlearn and no desire to unlearn it.

* * *

Voltaire's questioning of charges of indifference and non-resistance in the contemporary Jews

With his recognition that the religious creed in which one is raised depends on one's place of birth, Voltaire acknowledges that respect for that religion is difficult to shake off 'quand l'enfance l'a imprimé dans le cœur'; he concludes that 'les hommes sont toujours attachés à leurs anciens usages' (1735-52).⁶³⁸ This understanding gives further meaning to his comment that the Jews' 'unfortunate persuasion' must have been very strong, because they preferred to suffer the worst persecution rather than retract their beliefs. He holds that, while 'on a vu [...] quelques Juifs feindre d'abjurer, tantôt par avarice, tantôt par terreur', none had ever embraced Christianity in 'good faith' (1767).⁶³⁹ Judaism is the creed 'qui est le plus rarement abjurée' (1756) – here we need to be careful to mark Voltaire's

⁶³⁷ *La Pucelle*, III, 67-72, p.301.

⁶³⁸ *Le Siècle de Louis XIV*, I, 461, II, 5.

⁶³⁹ *Lettres à S.A. Mgr Le Prince de ****, p.517, p.516.

distinction between stubborn non-reasoning and the faithful adherence to a set of principles.⁶⁴⁰ But, even while in the *Homélie prononcées à Londres* he declares that ancient Jews were ‘d’un col roide et dur entendement’ (1767), he does not see in them an enduring essence of non-rational thinking. Suggesting that certain ‘modern’ Jews show evidence of reasoning, he declares that some people no longer believe Moses to be the author of the Pentateuch. Although in this case Voltaire’s main objective appears to be to undermine the authority of the early books of the Bible, and to question the way both Jews and Christians insist on adhering to their holy laws, this text does, nonetheless, introduce a figure of progress in his portrayal of the contemporary Jewish people, a move away from passive non-questioning to an application of reason.⁶⁴¹

In the ‘Lettre sur Mr Locke’ Voltaire reiterates his condemnation of people who, taught not to question, accept everything as the oracle: ‘Les superstitieux sont dans la société ce que les poltrons sont dans une armée’ (1738).⁶⁴² By this comparison, Voltaire links the religious and the social in a way that moves the attack forward into the area of general apathy and weakness, faults that have brought about the subjection or suffering of individuals. Failure to stand up to another’s abusive treatment means an acceptance of the role or place accorded to one – usury, servitude, prostitution, persecution, segregation and banishment. Furthermore, apathy, indifference or weakness do not excuse lapses from universal morality; Voltaire condemns non-resistance in those who do not stand up against wrongdoing, whether to the self or to the other. In carrying out orders, those under command are as responsible for their actions as those who initiate them. Referring to the slaves who aided Simeon and Levi in the murder of the people of Sichem, he writes: ‘Je dis que ces esclaves étaient aussi coupables que les maîtres [...] c’était un crime exécrationnable d’obéir à leurs commandements.’ Likewise executioners, unquestioningly obeying those who impose savage laws, ‘sont aussi criminels que les juges, quand ils mettent à exécution une sentence reconnue évidemment injuste et barbare au tribunal de la conscience de tous les hommes’ (1777). The morality on which true justice is founded is thus again

⁶⁴⁰ ‘Juifs’, p.524.

⁶⁴¹ *Homélie prononcées à Londres*, p.463, p.474.

⁶⁴² *Lettres philosophiques*, I, 201.

demonstrated to be independent of any particular interpretation, and concordant with the universal understanding of *la morale*, the morality common to all people who use their reason.⁶⁴³

To emphasize how apathy or passivity can open the way to fanaticism, Voltaire links the figure of indifference to that which diametrically opposes it: indifference is the other side of fanaticism, connected to it by a two-way movement – brutal fanaticism can cause fearful indifference, just as indifference allows for the growth of fanaticism. To illustrate that interdependence, Voltaire returns to the paradigm of public execution. He baldly describes the manner of the people's attendance at these events:

Toute la canaille qui court à ces spectacles, comme au sermon, parce qu'on y entre sans payer, fondait en larmes; et aucun n'aurait osé délivrer la victime, quoique tous eussent volontiers lapidé le barbare qui la faisait périr. (1777)⁶⁴⁴

The picture that Voltaire paints is one of cowardly submission, a fearfulness in the face of intimidation, a rejection of what one believes to be right. In *A.B.C.* he proposes that people have lost their liberty to act freely because of their own past actions:

Cela est clair: personne ne peut avoir perdu sa liberté que pour n'avoir pas su la défendre. Il y a eu deux manières de la perdre: c'est quand les sots ont été trompés par des fripons, ou quand les faibles ont été subjugués par les forts.

Because such timidity stifles true humanity, he therefore concludes that 'le plus grand défaut du genre humain [...] est d'être sot et poltron' (1768).⁶⁴⁵

* * *

Sermon des cinquante

Voltaire does not just explain the Jews' unreasoning acceptance of the biblical

⁶⁴³ *Prix de la justice*, p.572, p.573.

⁶⁴⁴ *Prix de la justice*, p.536.

⁶⁴⁵ *A.B.C.*, p.348, p.361.

stories by mental apathy, but also by their mode of action in general. He describes how at the time of their departure from Egypt ‘au lieu de prendre les armes en gens de cœur, [ils] s’enfuient en brigands conduits par leur Dieu’. While he mostly represents war as the cause of great suffering, sometimes he portrays it as necessary to defend one’s rights. He acknowledges that in certain cases battle may be justified, but he accuses the ancient Jews of fighting only when the results promised to be beneficial to themselves. For Voltaire, biblical history is either marked by this desire for personal advancement at any cost, or by cowardice and a non-concern for the well-being of others.⁶⁴⁶

* * *

‘Juifs’

Still presenting apathy as an enduring characteristic of the Jews, Voltaire unites it here with avarice. He contends that in Babylon this nation was ‘trop occupée de son commerce et de son courtage pour songer à la guerre’; through their trade the Jews ‘se rendirent nécessaires, comme il le sont encore, et ils s’enrichirent’ (1756). In the early part of ‘Juifs’, portraying the Jews’ financial usefulness as the result of their involvement in businesses that benefited themselves, Voltaire imputes their unwarlike character to selfish ambition and greed. In this case, his Jewish figure becomes that of self-serving indifference rather than that of a peace-loving nature.⁶⁴⁷

But at times in ‘Juifs’ Voltaire’s attack against Jewish apathy embraces his protest at the whole of mankind, and becomes part of a universal failing. In this case the figure of the *auto-da-fé* serves to expose, with all Voltaire’s sarcasm, the weakness and non-resistance of the spectators, content to witness the brutal suffering of victims. He writes:

Je pleurais à l’âge de seize ans quand on me disait qu’on avait brûlé à Lisbonne une mère et une fille pour avoir mangé debout un peu d’agneau cuit avec des laitues le quatorzième jour de la lune rousse; et je puis vous assurer que l’extrême beauté qu’on vantait dans cette fille

⁶⁴⁶ *Sermon des cinquante*, p.441.

⁶⁴⁷ ‘Juifs’, p. 519, p.516.

n'entra point dans la source de mes larmes, quoiqu'elle dût augmenter, dans les spectateurs,
l'horreur pour les assassins et la pitié pour la victime. (1771)⁶⁴⁸

Voltaire both derides the Jews' 'nonsensical' food laws, markers of their identity, and condemns the foolish and unthinking brutal nature of mankind as a whole that is prepared to persecute others for little or no reason. He applies the figure of the *auto-da-fé* to expose the illogical emotion of the people whose sympathy is increased because of the age and beauty of the victim. However, at this later period of writing, Voltaire places particular stress on the Jews' role as victims, and, despite the mockery, portrays them with a degree of sympathy that reiterates his condemnation of the way they have been selected as objects of abuse. He indicates the paradox by which they, mistakenly believing themselves to be the chosen people of God, have in reality become the chosen victims of others. But this does not mean that in this instance he removes all criticism from the Jews; he shows that, although he abhors the particularized nature of Christian persecution, he continues to include the Jews in that accusation of non-resistance and lack of reason common to so many people. The indictment remains against the Jews, although it has become softened by their inclusion in the universal.

* * *

La Pucelle

In *La Pucelle* Voltaire repeats this condemnation of all human apathy, portraying the spectators awaiting the public burning of Dorothée, afraid to stand up to the brutal executioner Sacrogorgon, the instrument of the Inquisition, whose name, created 'pour intimider la populace' (1756), acts as an indictment on the false sanctifying of brutality; it repeats the hypocrisy present in the neologism of the *auto-da-fé*.⁶⁴⁹ In describing how a follower may fawn over his master, Voltaire draws a connection between sycophancy and weakness: 'Il voit son maître, il rampe doucement, / Lèche ses mains, le flatte en son langage / Et pour du pain devient un vrai mouton' (1760: first published 1764); 'observant tout d'un œil

⁶⁴⁸ 'Juifs', pp.526-27.

⁶⁴⁹ *Essai sur les mœurs*, II, 174.

ferme et content' (1730-62), such an individual does not make use of his power to think, does not stand up for what is right.⁶⁵⁰

Using a similar figure, Voltaire represents Agnès, the 'objet charmant et doux', as fated always to sin unintentionally (1730-62). She succumbs to providence and accepts her part as victim. But while her position and the role of Sacrogorgon are of a totally different order, the latter belonging to the utterly brutal, yet both these people in their different ways fail by their common inability to resist the actions and orders of others. Finding a relationship between all cases of passivity, Voltaire exposes how the fault is merely a question of scale, a matter of how far the individual is prepared to go in his non-resistance; just as reasonable enthusiasm may develop into brutal fanaticism, passive indifference can open the way to an ever-developing abuse of justice. So the spectators at Dorothée's public burning, though again moved by the beauty of the victim, remain inactive and docile, condoning the events until the arrival of Dunois, after which their reactions undergo a complete reversal – an episode that indicates the fickleness and easy mobility of people's opinions, the way their thinking and behaviour may be directed solely by the guidance of others.⁶⁵¹

* * *

Candide

In the same way, in *Candide* the spectators at the *auto-da-fé* watch the horrifying ceremony with both apparent detachment and sentimentality; repeating his much used figure, Voltaire foregrounds their superficiality by showing that it is the beauty, or whiteness, of Candide's body that most impacts on Cunégonde. Similarly at the execution of the English Admiral, the passive on-lookers fail to protest against the unjust sentence. They allow themselves to accept the policy of those in power, to interpret the events as 'encouragement' to themselves – a cynical figure of deception and pragmatism that literally repeats that found in *Le Siècle de Louis XIV*, where Voltaire writes that the European habit to thank God for a non-existent victory was nothing other than an 'usage établi pour encourager

⁶⁵⁰ *La Pucelle*, XVIII, 95-97, p.535; VI, 409, p.373.

⁶⁵¹ *La Pucelle*, XI, 75-76, p.434.

les peuples, qu'il faut toujours tromper' (1735-52).⁶⁵²

Pangloss and the young baron both become metaphors for non-resistance: they are discovered enslaved in the galleys, a figure that echoes Voltaire mockery of all people who endure life without question in an attempt to live out their days undisturbed. In the *Essai sur les mœurs*, referring to events in fifteenth-century France, he suggests that when the people submitted to unthinking obedience, they 'fut enfin tranquille comme les forçats le sont dans une galère' (1756). Likewise, Don Issachar, intimidated by the Inquisitor's threatened *auto-da-fé*, accepts the lot that life has accorded to him. And Voltaire introduces another comparable figure of non-resistance in the person of the black slave, the mutilated worker who, even while doubting the pastors' paradoxical affirmations of a shared Christian brotherhood, accepts or resigns himself to the 'custom' of the sugar plantation. He, the victim, follows in the path of non-resistance first taken by his undemanding parent. But Voltaire, speaking with an elitist eighteenth-century voice that taps into the theories of Aristotle, then attributes the condition of slaves to their usually unchanging *génie*, to the unresisting character of their 'nations':

C'est par là que les nègres sont les esclaves des autres hommes. On les achète sur les côtes d'Afrique comme des bêtes, et les multitudes de ces noirs, transplantés dans nos colonies d'Amérique, servent un très petit nombre d'Européens. L'expérience a encore appris quelle supériorité ces Européens ont sur les Américains, qui, aisément vaincus partout, n'ont jamais osé tenter une révolution, quoiqu'ils fussent plus de mille contre un. (1756)⁶⁵³

But here, setting aside his reference to the fantasy of European superiority, we also find that Voltaire recognizes Christendom's wrongful treatment of others, and the way that those who are exploited can become conditioned to accept their situation.

At other times Voltaire partially dismantles the theory of man's unchanging *génie*. Showing how the formerly fanatical Anabaptists have become 'les plus paisibles de tous les hommes, occupés de leurs manufactures et de leur négoce, laborieux, charitables' (1756), he indicates that where reason is allowed to

⁶⁵² *Le Siècle de Louis XIV*, I, 270.

⁶⁵³ *Essai sur les mœurs*, II, 120, II, 381.

develop, the character or position of any group may change for the better.⁶⁵⁴ R.E. Florida explores the way the *philosophes* used the ‘anti-Nicene movements [...] as a contrast to orthodoxy’, and he shows how non-conformist groups who sought to promote reason and tolerance provided the writers with ‘examples to throw in the face of traditional Christianity.’⁶⁵⁵ Accordingly, Voltaire applies the figure of the now reasonable and tolerant Anabaptists, to set out his argument; although true equality can never be found and the weak will be ever vulnerable, everyone can and should endeavour to improve in some way the world in which they live. Encouraging people to be pragmatic, to accept that their full ambitions may not be fulfilled, Voltaire exhorts all individuals to strive to attain their rights as human beings and to become useful members of society. Weakness does not exempt people from the obligation to use their reason, to make a personal stand according to the tenets of universal morality. This point lies at the heart of the *conte*; Candide, finally settling down to his more banal existence, discovers how in a limited way he can make life more bearable: he comes to see that work does not just stave off ‘l’ennui, le vice, et le besoin’, but is also ‘le seul moyen de rendre la vie supportable’ for himself and for others.⁶⁵⁶

* * *

Essai sur les mœurs and La Philosophie de l’histoire

Stressing that freedom of thought is the greatest of freedoms, in *La Philosophie de l’histoire* Voltaire compares the *rustres* of Europe and the *sauvages* of the New World and Africa. Contradicting the contemporary Eurocentric thinking, he presents the former group as ignorant and uncreative; suffering fiscal depredations, attending religious ceremonies they do not understand, they become engaged in wars where they are forced ‘à s’aller faire tuer dans une terre étrangère, et à tuer leurs semblables pour le quart de ce qu’ils peuvent gagner chez eux en travaillant’. By contrast, those who are labelled as savages appear as infinitely superior to ‘nos rustres qui végètent dans nos villages,

⁶⁵⁴ *Essai sur les mœurs*, II, 302.

⁶⁵⁵ *Voltaire and the Socinians*, p.256, p.257.

⁶⁵⁶ *Candide*, p.258, p.260.

et des sybarites qui s'énervent dans nos villes' (1765) – a further reference to the greater value to society of those who fully use their limited powers, as compared to those who, wasting their abilities and talents, idle away their lives.⁶⁵⁷ Voltaire then contends that the reason that the Jews in sixteenth-century Poland were able to enrich themselves was found in 'l'orgueilleuse oisiveté des nobles et de l'esclavage du peuple' (1756).⁶⁵⁸

Repeating his representation of the *Sermon des cinquante* of a Jewish lack of resistance, Voltaire places in a historical context the Jews' supposed failure to rise up against oppression. He describes how they fled the rigours of Ferdinand and Isabella's Spain 'puisqu'ils préféraient la fuite à la révolte' (1756).⁶⁵⁹ A similar figure appears with his contention that weakness and feebleness caused the fall of ancient Rome. Making the satirical, and, what *he* sarcastically indicates, controversial suggestion that, in this case, the Romans might be compared to the Jews, he writes:

La faiblesse des empereurs, les factions de leurs ministres et de leurs eunuques, la haine que l'ancienne religion de l'empire portait à la nouvelle, les querelles sanglantes élevées dans le christianisme, les disputes théologiques substituées au maniement des armes, et la mollesse à la valeur.

(1765)⁶⁶⁰

While the past greatness of Rome's empire was the product of their people's courage and prudence, their failure was the result of their weakness and idleness. Subservience became responsible for their subjection. But, in a passage that recalls his thinking regarding Agnès, Voltaire takes the argument into another, more universal, field that partially reduces the negativity of his portrayal of submissiveness. Having praised the people of India and China for their lack of religious fanaticism and absence of warlike fervour, traits which place them above the more savage Europeans, he concludes: 'mais leur vertu même, ou plutôt leur

⁶⁵⁷ *La Philosophie de l'histoire*, p.109, p.110.

⁶⁵⁸ *Essai sur les mœurs*, II, 224.

⁶⁵⁹ *Essai sur les mœurs*, II, 350.

⁶⁶⁰ *La Philosophie de l'histoire*, p.266.

douceur les a perdus; ils ont été subjugués' (1756).⁶⁶¹

At times a similar dismantling appears regarding the Jews' supposed passivity. Voltaire repeatedly portrays those of his day as abstaining from war, and this representation links them with the Quakers. The Jews' non-bellicose character, dating according to Voltaire from the time of the Babylonian Exile, now takes on a more positive social significance. During the reign of Ferdinand and Isabella, the Jews 'étaient ce qu'ils sont partout ailleurs, les courtiers du commerce'. Their profession, 'loin d'être turbulante, ne peut subsister que par un esprit pacifique' (1756). Voltaire draws a distinction between the warlike Spanish people which 'ne savait que combattre', and the Jews who were 'necessary' merchants (1756). On this occasion, he shows their reputation not just resting on monetary dealings, but also on a non-warlike character that has allowed them to engage in commercial practices useful to the state. But, he contends, as a result the Spanish, jealous of their success, perceived the Jewish 'nation' as a threat, although 'n'étant point guerrière, elle n'était point à craindre' (1756) – a comment that reintroduces the connection between their success and the undeserved envy of their persecutors.⁶⁶²

* * *

Demonstrations of fanaticism and complacency by the Christians

In contrast to the more positive figures of constancy relating to the Jews, Voltaire repeatedly observes inconstancy in the followers of Christ; the latter do not adhere to religious dictates, and individuals are ready to renounce their faith. While conversion from Judaism to Christianity rarely occurs, certain Christians have abjured their religion in favour of that of the Jews. More negatively still, members of the Church find excuse for their greedy ambitions; not only do they engage financially with the Jews whom they persecute, but forge political alliances with peoples of differing faiths or religious convictions – actions that question the sincerity of Christ's followers. Voltaire declares: 'Si ce sont des

⁶⁶¹ *Essai sur les mœurs*, III, 180.

⁶⁶² *Essai sur les mœurs*, II, 350, 159, 160.

étrangers puissants, il est certain qu'un prince fera alliance avec eux. François I^{er}, très chrétien, s'unira avec les musulmans contre Charles-Quint, très catholique' (1764).⁶⁶³ He extends his religious argument to include negative elements found in the political and the social, once more uniting the Christians with those that they condemn. His portrayal of their intolerably selfish immorality and pragmatic greed presents the Church's differential posturing as one without foundation. He re-emphasizes the separation between fanaticism and philosophic indifference, vehemently addressing the Christians:

vous, ennemis de la raison et de Dieu, vous qui blasphémez l'un et l'autre, vous traitez l'humble doute et l'humble soumission du philosophe, comme le loup traite l'agneau dans les fables d'Ésope; [...] La philosophie ne se venge point; elle rit en paix de vos vains efforts; elle éclaire doucement les hommes, que vous voulez abrutir pour les rendre semblables à vous.

(1764)⁶⁶⁴

For Voltaire there is little difference between the messages contained in the works of fiction and the stories of the Bible, except that the latter, claiming to be the word of God, demand total belief and obedience. This, in his eyes, justifies his condemnation of all people who still unthinkingly have faith in the sacred texts, an indictment that implicitly includes the Christians. Just as the Jews unquestioningly accept their religious teachings, the unthinking members of the Church blindly follow the beliefs imposed on them by their spiritual leaders; just as the Jews blasphemously attribute fanaticism to the will of God, the Christians profanely ascribe such deeds to the will of Christ. Condemning the Bible's messages, Voltaire therefore exhorts its readers to follow his own example: 'Tournez-vous de tous les sens; tordez le texte, disputez contre les Pères de l'Église' (1771).⁶⁶⁵ Thinking Christians, guided by reason and universal morality, must find their own explanations for the contents of the texts. But the criticism does not stop here: like the Jews, in every area of life they should avoid passive indifference, reject fanaticism, and fight for the good of all human beings. While Christ's followers

⁶⁶³ 'Tolérance', *VF*, p.557.

⁶⁶⁴ 'Âme', pp.318-19.

⁶⁶⁵ 'Juifs', p.534.

claim to be superior to their ‘uncivilized’ other, their actions manifest the greatest reversal from humanity; it is the duty of all thinking people to ‘sonner le tocsin contre ces ennemis de l’humanité?’ (7/8 May 1761), and to strive for a world in which ‘les fanatiques, les superstitieux, les persécuteurs, deviennent hommes!’ (1761).⁶⁶⁶

* * *

Sermon des cinquante

In the *Sermon des cinquante* Voltaire illustrates how Christian savagery has developed with the increase in superstition. He contends that from its hidden beginnings it has grown in power to a position where ‘daring’ to invent new dogma that goes so far as to invest Jesus, the man, with the status of the son of God, it has propagated its teachings with ever-growing fanaticism. But he then suggests (as in the case of the followers of Judaism) that the Christians’ blind acceptance of their doctrine may be about to pass. He writes:

Avouez que vous soutenez des mensonges par des mensonges; avouez que la fureur de dominer sur les esprits, le fanatisme et le temps ont élevé cet édifice qui croule aujourd’hui de tous côtés, mesure que la raison déteste, et que l’erreur veut soutenir.⁶⁶⁷

He concludes the text reiterating that religion should unite and not divide men. But going further in the *Sermon prêché à Bâle*, he declares: ‘Si la religion n’a servi qu’à nous diviser, que la nature humaine nous réunisse’ (1768). This statement shows how for Voltaire, even if religion has failed in its objective, mankind can still be united through its shared humanity – proof, as he sees it, that man’s respect for man is more important than his respect for any individual religious doctrine.⁶⁶⁸

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⁶⁶⁶ D9771 to d’Alembert; *Sermon du Rabbin Akib*, p.281.

⁶⁶⁷ *Sermon des cinquante*, p.452.

⁶⁶⁸ *Sermon prêché à Bâle*, p.590.

La Pucelle

In *La Pucelle* Voltaire emphasizes how in the majority of Christians weakness leads to their complicity in the authorities' fanaticism. He takes this argument to its extreme in his representation of the paradoxical way henchmen perform their duties: outwardly they are strong and fierce, inwardly unresisting and cowardly. Fearful, or greedy for their own well-being, they are prepared to persecute others in order to protect themselves; preferring to be *satellites* rather than *suppliciés*, they demonstrate their supposed power by imposing their will on those who are weaker (1756).⁶⁶⁹

Dans la grand-place on élève un bûcher;

Trois cents archers, gens cruels et timides,

Du mal d'autrui monstres toujours avides,

Rangent le peuple, empêchent d'approcher.

(1734)⁶⁷⁰

Voltaire shows how, only by becoming thinking beings, people can find the courage to resist such intimidation, and the intimidators themselves can begin to reform their own behaviour. In 'Philosophe' he sets out his argument: 'Les gens non pensants demandent souvent aux gens pensants à quoi a servi la philosophie', to which he replies that enlightenment, by encouraging people to think, helps to reduce religious fanaticism, 'à éteindre enfin dans l'Espagne les abominables bûchers de l'Inquisition' (1771).⁶⁷¹

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Candide

In *Candide*, just as the spectators at the *auto-da-fé* show scant concern for the murderous events before them, Pangloss closes his mind to the questions raised by human suffering, and the 'wisest' old man in the Propontis refuses to involve himself in the affairs of others. In addition, Voltaire readdresses the issue of indifference through the figure of Pocourante. The Italian noble, who appreciates

⁶⁶⁹ *Essai sur les mœurs*, II, 351.

⁶⁷⁰ *La Pucelle*, VI, 402-05, p.373.

⁶⁷¹ 'Philosophe', M.xx, p.205 (originally in the *Questions sur l'Encyclopédie*).

that freedom of thought is 'le privilège de l'homme', proves that he is able to question public opinion, and yet he fails to make full use of his reason. Inactive and bored by life, he segregates himself from the world in a way that becomes symbolic of his total non-concern for matters relevant to others. He, failing to make use of the enlightenment that he has acquired, is apathetic to issues of importance to other people and, thereby, he is useless to society. In his case apathy does not relate to a lack of reasoning, but to a failure to use that reasoning to good purpose.⁶⁷²

Moreover, in order to mock the importance placed by Europeans on noble birth and social hierarchy, Voltaire parodies the significance given to the Baron de Thunder-ten-tronckh's heritage. This allows him to insist that the worth of an individual should not rest on specious claims to past nobility, antiquity, or even mythical chosenness, but on his personal value to society. Besides reiterating Voltaire's attack on the useless idleness of certain nobility, this figure dismantles the Church's pronouncements regarding Christ's descent from the biblical fathers.

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Essai sur le mœurs and La Philosophie de l'histoire

Although pointing to a *génie* of non-resistance among certain 'races', Voltaire repeatedly repudiates the suggestion that this justifies the actions of those who seek to deprive others of their rights as human beings. The failing in one group or individual does not legitimize the failing in the other. He condemns the actions of the Spanish in Peru, their transportation of black slaves from Africa 'like animals', and their failure to treat these and the people of the New World 'comme une espèce humaine' (1756). As in *Candide*, he points to the cruel paradox behind the European management of slaves:

Nous leur disons qu'ils sont hommes comme nous, qu'ils sont rachetés du sang d'un dieu mort pour eux, et ensuite on les fait travailler comme des bêtes de somme: on les nourrit plus mal; s'ils veulent s'enfuir, on leur coupe une jambe, et on leur fait tourner à bras l'arbre des

⁶⁷² *Candide*, p.235.

moulins à sucre, lorsqu'on leur a donné une jambe de bois. Après cela nous osons parler du droit des gens!

(1761)⁶⁷³

The Europeans' fervour, exercised in the name of religion, has become excuse for their most violent savagery – a trait that is the most extreme manifestation of the intolerable. Underlining the relationship between fanaticism and unreason, between violence and credulity, Voltaire declares: 'Jamais la nature humaine n'est si avilie que quand l'ignorance superstitieuse est armé du pouvoir' (1756). But such power can become reversed. Referring to the troubles under Henri IV, Voltaire describes how many peace-loving 'citizens', when led astray by their religion, performed their own acts of fanaticism against the wishes of those in positions above them: 'La plus vile populace fait en ce point la loi aux grands et aux sages' (1756). Empowered by their numbers, the same people whom the authorities had kept in ignorance, took control over their former masters. On this occasion the fanaticism of the weak caused suffering to the strong, thereby giving a reverse example of the way religion is able to promulgate the breakdown of civilized society.⁶⁷⁴

Even though the number of the enlightened may be few, Voltaire sees it as their duty to guide people onto the way of tolerance, a task which, he contends, in itself is not impossible: 'Il ne faut que cinq ou six philosophes qui s'entendent, pour renverser le colosse. [...] il s'agit d'arracher les pères de famille à la tyrannie des imposteurs, et d'inspirer l'esprit de tolérance' (6 December 1757).⁶⁷⁵ And he accepts that by education mankind is proceeding on a path to such enlightenment. Although 'tout n'est pas encore éclairé' (1761), he hopes that in time states might come to follow a *loi bienfaisante* 'en faveur de la tolérance universelle'. Portraying all mankind as members of a global community, he therefore sums up his programme with the following comment:

Vous tous qui m'écoutez, souvenez-vous que vous êtes hommes avant d'être citoyens d'une certaine ville, membres d'une certaine société, professant une certaine religion. Le temps est

⁶⁷³ *Essai sur les mœurs*, II, 401, 417.

⁶⁷⁴ *Essai sur les mœurs*, II, 351, 545.

⁶⁷⁵ D7499 to d'Alembert.

Although Voltaire sees violence as a natural trait of mankind, he does not consider it to be an inevitable characteristic, and he proposes that if we use our enlightenment, if we learn to think for ourselves, we can avoid succumbing to our baser instincts. Acknowledging that 'la pâte dont nous sommes pétris produit souvent des massacres, comme elle produit des calomnies, des vanités, des persécutions, et des impertinences' (1764), Voltaire recognizes that we are all subjects to bad behaviour. But, through reference to the Quakers, he gives proof that violence does not constitute a human essence, a realization that can encourage us to strive towards becoming more useful and tolerant citizens.⁶⁷⁷

Voltaire's programme is therefore grounded in his clear separation of the two meanings of both enthusiasm and indifference. In the former case he demands a rejection of that religious enthusiasm which drives individuals to perform acts of brutal fanaticism in the name of their faith; his demand is for a philosophic enthusiasm which seeks to encourage a greater involvement in issues fundamental to the well-being of all people. As for indifference, here Voltaire distinguishes between passive acceptance of violence and/or the suffering of others, and that thinking which acts as an antidote to religious fanaticism: the first allows for a tolerating of the intolerable, the second fosters a positive tolerance of those different from ourselves.

⁶⁷⁶ *Essai sur les mœurs*, II, 180; *Sermon prêché à Bâle*, p.583.

⁶⁷⁷ 'Fin, causes finales', p.119.

Chapter 7 Voltaire's self-representation in his drive for tolerance

Voltaire's disapproval of the hybrid character of the sacred texts (the conflation of fable and fact) causes him to adopt the same method in order, by ridicule, to demystify the Bible's message. This introduces a tension in that his adoption of a critical methodology identical to that which he denounces in the object of his critique – his use of unbelievable fiction to portray a deeper reality – confers on the biblical narratives a legitimacy and authority equal to his own. But when using the same technique, Voltaire stresses the difference between his openly fictional, comical texts, and the 'false' biblical accounts that profess to relate the truth. In both his burlesques and his straight-faced satirical analyses, he sets out to undermine the veracity of the holy scriptures: he farcically parodies the biblical figures, he emphasizes the contradictory nature of the supposed facts, and he presents a literal interpretation that intentionally dismantles the metaphorical content in the books of the Old Testament. However, while these manoeuvres endeavour to demolish the sacred nature of the texts revered by Jews and Christians, the ambivalence and sheer complexity of Voltaire's approach reminds one of Freud's example of a tendentious joke. This may be found 'when the intended rebellious criticism is directed against the subject himself, or, to put it more cautiously, against someone in whom the subject has a share – a collective person'. It may make use of what it condemns by 'the powerful technical method of absurdity' or by a 'representation by the opposite'. The humorous way that Voltaire represents Judaic teachings points to an acknowledgement of his belonging to the Judeo-Christian collective. But, at the same time, his discourse hints at his awareness of his place in another collective – the collective of all victims including the Jews. It is in these two areas that the private myth coincides with the public one.⁶⁷⁸

When examining Voltaire's texts, we find that the discourse on the Jews appears to change from one period to another, presenting a variation of register that comprises a disinterested investigation of historical prejudice and religious tradition, a comically parodic *bagatelle*, a clinical demolition of the holy writings, and a vitriolic, impassioned excoriation of all things Jewish. To explore this

⁶⁷⁸ *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, p.156, p.161.

tendency, it may help to consider how Voltaire represents his own sense of identity; this may enable us to uncover a personal myth through his writings, even though I am ever aware that, as Besterman claims, 'seldom has a great artist shown so profound a dislike for exhibiting in public the results of self-analysis'.⁶⁷⁹ But Bayard explains the need on the part of critics to be aware of that dimension, discernable in literary works even when the writer does not intend it.

Être concernés sur un plan fantasmatique, c'est percevoir dans les œuvres, derrière leurs intrigues officielles, les grands fantasmes humains – présents avec des variations dans toutes les cultures –, comme l'œdipe, la castration, la séduction, la scène originaire, le roman familial, fantasmes que nos œuvres illustrent abondamment si on les lit à la lumière de la psychanalyse.⁶⁸⁰

Bayard considers that fantasies might well not be 'directly readable', but uncovering them can offer possibilities to our greater appreciation of texts, and explain why some may appear less successful – a judgement often passed on the *Sermon des cinquante* and 'Juifs'. But, while some of the more 'controlled' texts indicate Voltaire's sympathy for all exploited people, in order to perceive the less visible elements of his discourse we need to observe how he carries that connection further. While he readily represents himself as having a share in the collective of the oppressed, at times he moves his argument on to a position where 'the subjective determinant' is more clearly marked by what Freud identifies as 'the share which the subject has in the person found fault with'. I propose that this development becomes most manifest in the texts introducing the least acceptable attacks on the Jews.⁶⁸¹

First let us consider Voltaire's share in the collective of those who suffer persecution. His identity as victim becomes apparent in his perception of the roles of individuals, whether those roles be allotted or chosen. His occupation as a writer belongs to the second category, but although chosen, it inexorably brought

⁶⁷⁹ Voltaire, p.430.

⁶⁸⁰ *Comment améliorer les œuvres ratées*, p.112.

⁶⁸¹ *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, p.157: here Freud is discussing the jokes that Jews tell about themselves, where their own comicality is integrated into their shared knowledge of their good qualities – unlike the anti-Jewish jokes of non-Jews.

with it the various tensions of eighteenth-century society. Pierre Lepape explains the social position at the time:

Au début du siècle, un auteur sur deux est un homme d'Église; un quart appartient à la noblesse. La part des nobles est plus grande encore dans le domaine de la littérature: les aristocrates animent les salons, et à partir de l'impulsion donnée à Versailles, dictent le bon goût en matière de lettres.⁶⁸²

Particularly in the early years of the century, many artists who were commoners found themselves living on the fringe of the aristocracy, a paradoxical situation that Voltaire did not begin to appreciate fully before his confrontation with the noble Chevalier de Rohan-Chabot in 1726. This semi-subordinate status also helps explain Voltaire's preoccupation with the acquisition of wealth, his desire to achieve financial independence and not to join the ranks of impoverished writers, his self-confessed 'seduction' by the status of princes and his apparent self-ennoblement when rejecting the name of Arouet.⁶⁸³ For him his chosen profession unites him with those employed in (at times) similarly undervalued or exploited occupations. So Paquette's description of prostitution, which she calls 'ce métier abominable qui vous paraît si plaisant à vous autres hommes, et qui n'est pour nous qu'un abîme de misères', may on occasion apply to the occupations of various others; the courtesan, the actress, the usurer and, by extension, the author.⁶⁸⁴ Voltaire declares: 'Il y a quarante ans et plus que je fais le malheureux métier d'homme de lettres, et il y a quarante ans que je suis accablé d'ennemis' (19 January 1758), while in his letter to Helvétius (19 January 1759) he creates a causality between persecution and calumny – the results of his writing – and his exile:

Ce sont en partie ces tracasseries des M^{rs} les gens de lettres et encor plus les persécutions, les calomnies, les interprétations odieuses des choses les plus raisonnables, la petite envie, les orages continuels attachez à la littérature qui m'ont fait quitter la France.⁶⁸⁵

⁶⁸² *Voltaire le conquérant*, p.90.

⁶⁸³ *Mémoires* (1759), p.17.

⁶⁸⁴ *Candide*, pp.227-28.

⁶⁸⁵ D7592 to d'Alembert; D8055.

With irony he writes to Hénault: ‘Il faudra toujours que les gens de lettres soient persécutés par la calomnie; c’est leur partage, c’est leur récompense’ (20 October 1764).⁶⁸⁶ In the ‘Gens de lettres’ he analyzes the problem further:

Il y a beaucoup de gens de lettres qui ne sont point auteurs, et ce sont probablement les plus heureux; ils sont à l’abri des dégoûts que la profession d’auteur entraîne quelquefois, des querelles que la rivalité fait naître, des animosités de parti, et des faux jugements; ils sont plus unis entre eux; ils jouissent plus de la société; ils sont juges, et les autres sont jugés.

(1757)⁶⁸⁷

But the sense of discrimination goes deeper still. Prostitutes, actresses, non-Catholic believers (including at times even the Jansenists), as fellow sufferers, are victims with whom Voltaire empathizes. He shares with them a deep concern as to the possible treatment of their bodies after death, the real likelihood of being condemned to the public pit. Besterman feels forced to concede that Voltaire’s receiving of the sacrament at Easter was an act of expediency, and it is highly feasible that, like the events surrounding his deathbed and the subsequent clandestine removal of his body from Paris, this action was in part motivated by anxieties regarding the eventual treatment of his corpse.⁶⁸⁸ Voltaire openly expressed his fear of non-burial, and in his letter to the Comte and Comtesse d’Argental displaces the designation of hypocrisy – connecting it not to his own pragmatic thought, but to the thinking of the Church: ‘je vais à la messe de ma paroisse; j’édifie mon peuple; je bâtis une eglise; j’y communie, et je m’y ferai enterrer, mort-dieu! malgré les hypocrites’ (14 January 1761).⁶⁸⁹

This letter raises the possibility of a further dimension in Voltaire’s understanding of self; for him the individual’s sense of identity may be found in his utility, in his useful purpose for mankind. Accordingly, when writing to him, Madame Bentinck insists: ‘Hâtez-vous de faire votre métier d’être utile aux

⁶⁸⁶ D12159.

⁶⁸⁷ ‘Gens de lettres’, in *Articles pour l’Encyclopédie*, p.123.

⁶⁸⁸ *Voltaire*, p.473.

⁶⁸⁹ D9540.

humains, vos semblables' (23 June 1758).⁶⁹⁰ And contending that 'le plus grand service est d'éclairer les hommes' (11 October 1763), Voltaire declares that he 'writes to act' (c.15 April 1767).⁶⁹¹ To Elie Bertrand he professes that 'tous les hommes sont frères, et les meilleurs frères sont ceux qui cultivent les lettres' (1 January 1765).⁶⁹² In the same vein, and conflating the drive for enlightenment with a biblical analogy, he writes: 'Cette grande mission a déjà d'heureux succès. La vigne de la vérité est bien cultivée par des d'Alembert, des Diderot, des Bolingbroke, des Hume, etc' (6 December 1757).⁶⁹³

Drawing on the figure that concludes *Candide*, Voltaire links the cultivation of letters with his combat against fanaticism. As Christopher Cave writes: "'Cultiver les lettres" signifie dans le dictionnaire voltairien "combattre" et Voltaire a déjà spécifié qu'il n'était qu'un pauvre cultivateur.' By making a play of his age and fragility, Voltaire distances himself from his attack; this action both offers protection to himself and makes his criticism more effective by appearing less dogmatically authoritative. As Cave shows, in his correspondance this vulnerable 'représentation de soi' becomes an 'arme de combat', where the denegation '*dit* le combat de manière codée, par inversion, allusion, ou ironie';⁶⁹⁴ the same denial marks Voltaire's letter to Jacob Vernes where he questions the worth of his profession (? c. 20 December 1764).⁶⁹⁵ But his need to make himself useful again appears in his letters to Antoine Jean Gabriel Le Bault, where, in a more practical vein, he claims to be buying the estate of Ferney 'pour y faire un peu de bien' (18 November 1758), and to Damilaville where he says that he fears that he will die before having 'rendu service' (25 August 1766).⁶⁹⁶

The notion of usefulness is much repeated in Voltaire's Jewish discourse, and can count as the second aspect of his personal myth; his share in the collective with those that he most criticizes. In the *Essai sur les mœurs* he indicates that the Jews' very existence depends on their necessity to other nations. With punning irony he suggests that when the Jews cease to be of service, *nécessairement* they

⁶⁹⁰ D7764.

⁶⁹¹ D11453 to d'Argence; D14117 to Jacob Vernes.

⁶⁹² D12284.

⁶⁹³ D7499 to d'Alembert.

⁶⁹⁴ *Voltaire et ses combats*, I, 238 (author's italics).

⁶⁹⁵ D12251.

⁶⁹⁶ D7946; D13513.

will cease to be a 'separate society'; they will become absorbed into the 'scum' of the world (1761). Here, I propose, we can discover a figurative network linking Voltaire's life's work with the Jewish trades: both are necessary. The writer and (according to him) the Jewish people construct their selfhood in that characteristic of being needed; this quality becomes essential to their sense of identity and self-worth. A further negative figure unites members of this collective. Just as he, at different periods, is either feted or reviled, the Jews from place to place or time to time have received totally contradictory treatment at the hands of the pragmatic Christians; this cruel paradox he addresses in 'Juifs', and again in the *Essai sur les mœurs* where he sums up: 'Ce n'est pas une légère preuve des caprices de l'esprit humain de voir les descendants de Jacob brûlés en procession à Lisbonne, et aspirant à tous les privilèges de la Grande-Bretagne' (1761). The commercial trader and the author (like the prostitute, actress, and usurer) are appreciated when useful, but are scorned and derided when no longer deemed of service.⁶⁹⁷

This important homology requires further comments. First, it is I, of course, not Voltaire, who points to these remarkable similarities linking self-portrayal to the portrayal of the Jews, so as to discern the development through his writing life of a personal myth of which he may have been partially aware, but which he never made explicit. Second, we would not expect Voltaire to thematize his sense of his own usefulness exactly as he does that of the Jews. While 'le plus grand service est celui d'éclairer les gens', he ranks the money-lending to which Christendom relegated the Jews one of the lowest of services. However, the two useful tasks have a common relational structure, in the fact that those for whom Voltaire and the Jews are useful and even needed, the privileged members of the larger society, treat them badly. There is plenty of textual evidence of this shared relational structure, which helps us to grasp the writer's personal myth through an imaginary identification. Voltaire rejects subjective writing (like that of Rousseau) and must presumably therefore find subjective satisfaction in writing frequently about the Jews, where he can combine compassion with reversal into the negative. No one could deny that he found the Jews highly important in European society to give them and their destiny so much attention. My point is that their importance in his eyes lay not only in the Judaic foundations of Christianity, but also in the

⁶⁹⁷ *Essai sur les mœurs*, II, 166, 164.

correspondence between their destiny and his way of experiencing his own; his personal myth. This *rapprochement* must have had more than subjective value, however; Voltaire must have felt it contained a key of some sort to the troubled history of Europe, or he would hardly have persisted in his references to the Jews in so many writings for so many years. As for the extent to which those references relied on anti-Jewish stereotypes, we can at least remark that there is no impartial access to knowledge of human reality. Any grasp of reality has our own particular fantasy as a starting-point. As a final comment at this point in my discussion, we might add to the striking homologies in the texts about Jews and about himself – usefulness alternating with dispensability – another homology that Voltaire may well have thought about. The writer and ‘the Jew’ are not merely useful or useless to the privileged, but disturbing, and therefore roundly condemned by those in power when they dare to depart from their instrumental role of objects for the privileged, when they dare to exhibit their autonomy as subjects: the writer, when he construes enlightenment as critique of the powerful; ‘the Jew’, when he manages despite discrimination to enrich or otherwise distinguish himself. Furthermore, though Voltaire did not foretell this, they were to share the other side of that same coin: Voltaire, and also the Jews, would have through their efforts a future *rayonnement*, a reversal into the positive, not included in the birthright of the privileged of the Ancien Regime.

To this representation we might add other issues that appear either directly or indirectly linked in Voltaire’s discourse: the Jewish role of outsider and his own self-claimed illegitimacy, the Jews’ exile and non-belonging and his sense of banishment, their alleged scheming and avaricious nature and his ready involvement in questionable financial affairs, their castration/circumcision and his self-claimed physical weakness and impotence (Gilman marks out a commonly perceived analogy between the circumcised Jew and the ‘feminized male’).⁶⁹⁸ Repeatedly in his correspondence, Voltaire refers to his exile *dans le désert* at Ferney; Frederick II describes him as a *fripon* (22 January 1751);⁶⁹⁹ Madame Denis calls him avaricious, and, in a note to *La Pucelle*, Voltaire refers to Fréron’s

⁶⁹⁸ *Inscribing the Other*, p.138.

⁶⁹⁹ D4358 to Sophia Frederika Wilhelmina of Prussia.

accusation against him of plagiarism.⁷⁰⁰ The documented attribution of comparable characteristics to himself and to the stereotypically represented 'Jew', supports Pomeau's comments relating to Voltaire's attitude towards Salomon Levy, and Poliakov's contention that Voltaire was ever seeking to 'se débarrasser du Juif en lui'.⁷⁰¹ Manuel suggests something similar with his comment that 'one might half-seriously venture the idea that Voltaire found in the Jews and ancient Judaism a fetish into which he could pour those aspects of his being that he loathed in himself'.⁷⁰² Sibony shows how such negative thinking regarding the other does not rest on intolerance of difference but on '*la peur de voir l'autre, qui dans sa différence est soupçonné semblable*' (author's italics).⁷⁰³

What we might therefore call an imaginary 'Jewishness' in Voltaire's sense of identity becomes more marked around the period generally agreed to have been one of the most troubling for him. It was in that period that some of Voltaire's most vitriolic writings addressing the Jews appear, suggesting that there was an *excès d'hallucination* at that time, where the writing is 'submergée par un trop-plein d'affects et de représentations, comme possédée par eux'. Here Voltaire 'laisse transparaître, avec peu d'aménagements, l'intensité de sa souffrance ou le contenu de ses désirs'.⁷⁰⁴

In the period in question there appears a lack of 'isolation', an interruption to, what Pomeau terms, Voltaire's 'interior veto'.⁷⁰⁵ The Jewish discourse becomes particularly subjective, no longer the cool repetition of religious traditions with satirical comments as found in the 'Remarques sur les Pensées de M. Pascal' (1734), not a farcical parodic satire of human folly or religious faith as in *La Pucelle* (1730-62), *Le Mondain* (1736) or *Candide* (1759), not the bitter sarcastic attack on the 'fables' of Judaism as in the 'Réponse à quelques objections' ('Juifs', Section IV, 1771) and the *La Bible enfin expliquée* (1776), nor the logical dismantling of the 'impossible' biblical accounts on which Christianity is founded as in the *Histoire de l'établissement du christianisme* (1777) and the *Dernières*

⁷⁰⁰ See D5714, Voltaire to d'Argental (10 March 1754); *La Pucelle*, VI, p.371.

⁷⁰¹ *Histoire de l'antisémitisme*, p.115.

⁷⁰² 'Israel and the Enlightenment', p.39.

⁷⁰³ *Le 'racisme', une haine identitaire*, p.97.

⁷⁰⁴ *Comment améliorer les œuvres ratées*, p.96.

⁷⁰⁵ *Candide* (1959), p.10.

remarques sur les Pensées de M. Pascal (1777). In *La Bible enfin expliquée* Voltaire removes his authorial presence entirely from the body of the writing; he reproduces the texts verbatim thereby allowing them to perform a self-demolition, merely aided by his highly satirical and literal antiphrasal footnotes. Contrary to Poliakov, who argues that Voltaire's 'antisemitism' increasingly develops during his life, I would contend that while his later works lose none of their savage virulence against the Judaic faith, stories and traditions, and while these writings become ever more surgical in their demolition of the biblical texts, it is in the *Sermon des cinquante* – here I rely on Wade and Desné's research and dating – and in the early part of 'Juifs' that the tone is more 'chimerical' in the sense that Langmuir uses this term, that is, reactive to 'ill-understood menaces to individual psychic integration'. In these instances the writing becomes extremely subjective, with repeated reference to Jewish 'plagiarism', 'dirtiness', 'savagery', 'immorality', and 'disgusting practices'. These highly negative projections are certainly not absent at other periods, but I would argue that in those cases they generally appear either with less intensity or less frequency, or in the form of a satirical attack, not so much against the people, as against the religion that holds the teachings sacred. Voltaire's prejudices always troubled him, but in his periods of control, his thinking regarding them surfaces less passionately in the text.⁷⁰⁶

The question therefore arises: what made that middle period so significant to Voltaire's self-understanding, and intensified his imaginary 'Jewishness'? In line with Maaron's methodology, we can refer here to biographical evidence, looking first at his relationships with two women particularly close to him around this time. We know of his bitter disillusionment and disappointment on discovering his former mistress, Madame du Châtelet, with Saint-Lambert, and Pomeau has indicated the possible parallel between the episode in *Candide* and the writer's own experience; Don Issachar – 'the Jew' – discovers Cunégonde with the eponymous hero on a sofa, just as Voltaire found Émilie with her new lover in a similar situation. People have tried to blame both parties, some accusing Voltaire of earlier desertion, others indicting Madame du Châtelet with unfaithfulness, but I introduce this and other events into my thesis only for the relevance they may

⁷⁰⁶ *Toward a Definition of Antisemitism*, p.33.

have for Voltaire's writing of the period.⁷⁰⁷ We now know from the discovery of certain correspondence that, notwithstanding his distress on learning of Émilie's affair, Voltaire himself had been for some time engaged in an intimate relationship with his niece, Madame Denis. Dawson, like Besterman, emphasizes the contemporary attitudes towards incest and remarks that such 'relationships were not uncommon in the eighteenth century' (although she suggests a certain unease in Voltaire, and reminds us how he requested his letters to be burned). Dawson draws attention to how, around 1750, the highly erotic register disappears from the love letters to Madame Denis. Voltaire continues to write to her, but the tone changes. Following Madame du Châtelet's untimely death after the birth of Saint-Lambert's child in 1749, Voltaire appeared distraught, and shortly afterwards he moved to Potsdam to take up residence at the court of Frederick II, with whom Mason contends he had in 1740 probably first engaged in a homosexual relationship. But the 1750-53 visit ended in disaster when Voltaire felt obliged to leave in disgrace. This is the period of Frederick's supposed 'squeezed orange' remark indicating the end of Voltaire's usefulness, the shameful Hirschel affair, and the humiliating arrest by Frederick's men of Voltaire and Madame Denis at Frankfurt, where he was accused of 'stealing' the king's own manuscript. In view of these events Voltaire's allegations about the Jews' sexual conduct and way of life can be seen to address the characteristics, proclivities and failings which, at times, he might have found in himself.⁷⁰⁸

When we consider those episodes in light of his literary figures of Jewishness, certain similar, much repeated, themes come to mind; among them, homosexuality, adultery and incest. Although these are addressed in Voltaire's texts in terms of the (for him) unstable or immoral nature of both Christian dictate and Judaic teaching, his repeated reference to these figures also suggests some degree of awareness, perhaps scarcely conscious and manifestly not thought through, of a connection to events in his own life: his affairs with Madame Denis and (possibly) with Frederick II, and his close attachment to the 'divine' Émilie whom he describes and praises in masculine terms. Although we no longer have all his intimate correspondence, what we know of these important relationships

⁷⁰⁷ *Candide* (1959), p.245, note 4.

⁷⁰⁸ *Voltaire's Correspondence – An Epistolary Novel*, p.65.

suggests that they fell into the 'transgressive' or illegitimate domain – incestuous, adulterous or homosexual – this last being punishable by death in the eighteenth century, and in a manner similar to that which had been so often meted out to the Jews. On 24th May 1726 Voltaire's old acquaintance Deschaufours was burned at the stake for sodomy, and in 1750, the year following Madame du Châtelet's death, in Paris, two others charged with pederasty were similarly executed.⁷⁰⁹

While Voltaire may have felt particularly drawn following Madame du Châtelet's death to readdress the biblical texts that he had studied with her when at Cirey, the cessation at this same time of his erotic correspondence with his niece may indicate an uncertainty about the complexity of his own identity, sexuality, and inconstancy, a self-questioning which, being largely unreflected, might well become projected on to the scapegoat group that was so often in his thoughts. And, while Voltaire's experiences around 1750 suggest some immediate links with his writing on the Jews at that same time, the aspect of sexual distress which seems to characterize those experiences may invite associations with his childhood as a pupil of the Jesuits, if Wootton is right to attach decisive importance to the evidence of the Jesuits' pederastic abuse of their young charges. Such a stark contradiction between the sanctity and authority claimed by those spiritual fathers and their 'incestuous' practices in turn imposes a condensing together of Voltaire's indignation at these hypocritical father figures and his ambivalence about his own father, setting up an emotional situation, perhaps a real crisis, which in a man so reticent about self-exploration could all too easily find an outlet in expressions of anti-Jewish rage. While Voltaire does not demand to be understood 'from within', as does Rousseau, it seems fair enough to carry our scholarly investigation of his writing forward in spite of him, with the help of such evidence as specialists have accrued about his affective life. In doing so, and in searching for traces of a personal myth within his often unimpressive, at times chaotic commentaries on the Jews, we certainly do not hope to reduce the work to the life, but rather to observe a partial and reluctant emergence, even through the very trajectory of Voltaire's figures, of the unhappy consciousness of modernity.

This hope appears to be well-founded; on the one hand because the traces of

⁷⁰⁹ cf. D923 to Pierre Joseph Thoulhier d'Olivet (4 October 1735), p.221, note 5; Rictor Norton, *Mother Clap's Molly House*, p.255.

the personal myth – a persevering identification with the Jews – lie on the textual surface (one does not have to excavate Freudian slips), and on the other hand because in *Candide*, Voltaire recognizes that ‘les chagrins secrets sont encore plus cruels que les misères publiques’.⁷¹⁰ Pomeau suggests that when Voltaire is ‘too happy’ he cannot write his *contes*, and Marthe Robert argues that creativity may be advanced by suffering and that ‘sans désillusion, il n’y aurait lieu de rêver’.⁷¹¹ Mason proposes that, in *L’Ingénu* (1767) Voltaire shows ‘the educative function of pain’, its fostering of ‘wisdom, understanding and tolerance’.⁷¹² Voltaire’s recent unhappy experiences – in addition to his realization of his apparently permanent exile from Paris, together with those distressing public events such as the Lisbon earthquake and outbreak of the Seven Years War – may have found a better outlet, or some sort of resolution, in his change of literary direction at this time towards propaganda writing in the cause of tolerance. Critics agree that *Candide* marks a turning point in the author’s life and *œuvre*; in the year of the *conte*’s publication in 1759, writing to Frederick, Voltaire expresses his hostility to *l’infâme*, while the following year, in his letter to d’Alembert, we find the beginnings of his campaign to ‘écraser l’infâme’ (23 June 1760).⁷¹³

I suggest that we acknowledge another development; the further progression of his thinking that becomes evident in the period between the writing of *Candide* and the *Traité sur la tolérance* (1763), one that marks a dramatic advance beyond his worst anti-Jewish attacks. The *Sermon du Rabbin Akib* (1761) fits into this timescale, and bears comparison with the earlier *Sermon des cinquante*. The two *Sermons* both call to God the creator of all mankind, both pray for abstention by all people from intolerant acts, both promote a general obedience to the political laws. Both sermons parody devout spiritual homelies, one from a deist and the other from a Judaic viewpoint. But the later work reconsiders and reassesses many of the issues introduced into the earlier one; Jewish identity, the Judeo-Christian relationship, Jewish constancy, customs, guilt. Here an identity founded on wandering, dispersion and non-integration is represented not as different from, but as similar to that of other nations; distinctions between the religious groups are

⁷¹⁰ *Candide*, p.202.

⁷¹¹ *Candide* (1959), p.15; *Origines du roman*, p.65.

⁷¹² *Voltaire* (1975), p.77.

⁷¹³ D9006.

reduced to the Christians' being merely a *partie* of the Jews, the direct result of the former's desire to separate themselves from the latter. Discrimination against the Jews is metaphorically explained in terms of 'a respectable mother who has been chased from her home', an action by their enemies that has led to the paradoxical situation whereby the Jews are blamed for no longer inhabiting 'cette maison détruite'. Similarly, circumcision and other religious practices such as the Jewish food laws become a Christian obsession alone.⁷¹⁴ Actions held responsible for the Jews' enduring persecution are represented in a more favourable way; Christ's crucifixion was carried out by the Romans, non-recognition of his divinity was in line with the thinking of many people until after the Council of Nicea. Here Voltaire also foregrounds the speciousness of claims that the Jews have been involved in 'disgusting' practices – human sacrifice, coprology and even usury. And he demolishes the Christians' justifications for their persecutory actions by emphasizing the extent of time that divides the biblical Jews from those of the present day. Using the Christians' own arguments against the Jewish doctrine that punishment may be deferred to future generations, he questions the former's right to persecute the contemporary Jews for ancient crimes by pointing out how absurd it would be to punish in like manner the contemporary Vatican leaders for the Romans' rape of the Sabines. So Voltaire argues against a common stereotype: the condemnation and persecution of a whole society for the faults of the few. Katz sees the later *Sermon* as the one occasion where Voltaire shows sympathy for the Jews, but I propose that this text distinguishes itself for another reason. On this occasion, Voltaire concerns himself not with Judaism, but with the contemporary Jewish people, and in a way that reveals that they are not all 'tainted by the same defects as their forefathers'; they should not be confused with the people of antiquity.⁷¹⁵

However, this same figure introduces a discontinuity in Voltaire's argument: the very teaching of the biblical Jews, their deferral of guilt to later generations, implies negation of guilt by the individual – the non-acceptance of responsibility for a personal sin, the refusal by the sinner to pay for his own crimes. Although in 'Athée, athéisme' Voltaire suggests that persecution to the fourth generation could

⁷¹⁴ *Sermon du Rabbin Akib*, p.282.

⁷¹⁵ *From Prejudice to Destruction*, p.42.

act as a highly effective ‘brake’ to corrupt behaviour (1764), in the main, on this count he considers that the Jews deserve to be criticized for their ‘immoral’ and illogical teachings.⁷¹⁶ Deferral of punishment to an innocent victim who suffers for the sins of others, also forms a figurative network with his representation of the treatment of bastards, a collective of victims that includes, not just the Protestants (often, because of Catholic restrictions, declared illegitimate), but also others such as himself. Bastards, like *Candide*, may suffer discrimination and be denied the benefits of family, position and wealth. They, the undeserving heirs, suffer for the faults of their fathers. Voltaire mocks the idea that it is fair to ‘punir tous les descendants d’une faute de leur père’ (1766), and comments that ‘il n’est pas juste de vous saigner et de vous purger parce que vos pères ont été malades’ (1765) – a telling metaphorical link between blood-letting and sickness that fits with Voltaire’s repeated figure of violence and the ‘plague’ of superstition and fanaticism. While the instigators of any such tradition are to be condemned, the inheritors deserve commiseration.⁷¹⁷

Yet from here Voltaire takes his argument further so as now to address in particular the Catholics. Their denigration of the Jewish idea of deferred retribution is part and parcel of their own sophistry and manipulation; while ridiculing the belief of the Jews, they have used it in modified but fundamentally identical form in their own doctrine of original sin. This Church dogma creates a need in the people for Christian baptism, that sacrament which forms a dual function in that it washes away the ‘inherited’ guilt of individuals, and thereby engages them in a lifelong Church membership that reinforces the power of the Church. Voltaire, through the Quaker, portrays the ritual of baptism as a mere Judaic ceremony that, like circumcision, deserves to be rejected by Christian believers. And his final indictment of the doctrine of original sin lies in its illogicality; for the Church, the inherited guilt does not descend from once-living ancestors who chose to pursue their savage agenda, but from a mythical innocent (if not ignorant) parent who was seduced into wrongdoing by what is, for Voltaire, the fictional figure of the serpent – a particularly ridiculous ‘sin’ since it was prompted by the desire for knowledge, the mark of humanity. Graver than that,

⁷¹⁶ ‘Athée, athéisme’, p.386.

⁷¹⁷ *André Destouches à Siam*, p.120; *Pot-pourri*, pp.266-67.

even while exploiting the doctrine of deferred guilt in its own self-interest, the Church condemns the Jews' belief in it, and uses that belief as an excuse for their persecution of the Jewish people. Through a reversal of logic, the Christians have invested the Jews, what Voltaire repeatedly represents as their 'parent' nation or religion, with an impure identity; this, as it were, bastardized denomination is thereby denied its legitimacy and forced into exclusion. This reveals the Christians as doubly guilty; not just as the persecutors of others for a specious definition of their own legitimacy, but also as perpetrators of parricide.⁷¹⁸

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When readressing the question of how far Voltaire's period of hallucinatory writing impinges on his perceived position as the champion of tolerance, I find that whereas so much of his work concentrates on the demolition of the special, holy nature of the Bible texts – an anti-*Judaism* which cannot be denied – the anti-*Jewish* element is chiefly found in what I term the middle period. But, although here the negative tone occurs with sufficient force to stand out even when considered within the framework of the eighteenth-century stereotypical fantasies, the question of Voltaire's tolerance remains open. He declares when writing to d'Alembert regarding the 'supposed' author of 'Tolérance': 'Il voulait dans son texte inspirer de l'indulgence, et rendre dans ses notes les Juifs exécration. Il voulait forcer ses lecteurs à respecter l'humanité, et à détester le fanatisme' (1 March 1764). While statements such as this have caused certain critics to level charges of antisemitism against him, when explaining the 'writer's' *système*, Voltaire reaffirms his separation of the Bible from the contemporary world; he condemns solely the allegedly mythical and fanatical people of the Old Testament, thereby leaving the eighteenth-century Jews included in his programme of tolerance for all living individuals.⁷¹⁹

Voltaire constantly indicates a permanence in the Jews' 'wretched' status, but over time he represents this figure in different ways. While in 1776 he portrays their non-belonging in terms of a continued 'unfortunate' victimhood, in the

⁷¹⁸ *Lettres philosophiques*, I, 3-4.

⁷¹⁹ D11738.

earlier section I of 'Juifs', his description is more negative: he claims that still 'today' they mistakenly hold to a unquestioning belief in their chosenness, that still their character is marked by deviousness and deception (1756). But even in this less controlled text, Voltaire shows how such characteristics have been encouraged by the Jews' involvement in those trades that the Christians have forced on them, and this acknowledgement exposes the tension that exists between his conscious drive for tolerance, and his unreflective intolerance. His comments also show us that he regards apathy as a characteristic fundamental to Jewish identity; in the religious domain it supposedly 'explains' a 'foolish', unreasoning adherence to an amoral/immoral and illogical biblical teaching, and, in the social, a passive acceptance of a subservient role. However, even while he suggests that it is in apathy above all that a continuity may be found between the people of the mythical past and the present, he acknowledges the universal character of passivity, and how transcending it calls for the greatest effort on the part of any individual.⁷²⁰

Further to this, I would argue that when charging the Jews with passivity, he is not so much adopting the common stereotypical fantasy as drawing on his self-understanding. At times his own actions suggest his continued fearfulness in the face of possible persecution, and on occasion he shows recognition of his own non-resistance to his victimhood. When referring to the way the *Dictionnaire philosophique* has been received, in his letter to Damilaville he acknowledges his continuing dread of mistreatment:

Que deviendra votre ami? quel rôle jouera-t-il, quand l'ouvrage auquel il a travaillé 20 années devient l'horreur ou le jouet des ennemis de la raison? ne sent il pas que sa personne sera toujours en danger, et que ce qu'il peut espérer de mieux est de se soustraire à la persécution, sans pouvoir jamais prétendre à rien, sans oser ni parler ni écrire. (18 August 1766)⁷²¹

And to d'Argental he further explains his receiving of the sacrament at Easter: 'Je ne veux point être martyr à mon âge. [...] Calomnié continuellement, pouvant être condamné sans être entendu, je passe mes derniers jours dans une crainte trop

⁷²⁰ *La Bible enfin expliquée*, p.44, note 1.

⁷²¹ D13500.

fondée' (1 April 1768).⁷²²

Voltaire shows how those who are oppressed – here we could read Agnès, the black slave, and even Candide – seldom even consider changing what appears to be the norm. People who are exploited, if conditioned to accept their role, need an external impetus to set them on the path to taking responsibility for themselves and to claiming the rights that they and others deserve. This argument raises a further fundamental issue. If the impetus for change may be painful experience or another's powers of persuasion, and if Voltaire became inspired to embark in a new direction as a result of his own suffering, his awareness of this in his own experience may have prompted his blunt exhortation to the Jews in 'Juifs'; it is by achieving autonomy of judgement that people can improve their situation. Personal misfortune can be partially mitigated by one's own determined action. In his discourse relating to the contemporary Jews, today's readers can see that unlike the modern era's racist or antisemite, he never rejects them as unchangeable. Whereas in apartheid South Africa the persecution of black Africans was justified by the doctrine relating to skin colour, and whereas Nazism relied on a notion of genetic inheritance, Voltaire only attacks supposed traits that are within the individual's power to alter.

At the conclusion of this account of my research into Voltaire's figures, it is no longer possible for me to conceive his often open contempt for the Jews and Jewishness otherwise than as inseparable from his sense of himself and how others may perceive him: thieving, avaricious, deceiving, wretched. Certainly, his support for victims of discrimination is grounded in his own sense of being a victim himself. We could well imagine that his repetitious outbursts of anger at the Jews in their abject history expresses a sense of being persecuted by the very thought of them; by the power of that thought to arouse in him the sense of being a victim, the subjectivity he never wanted to explore in writing.⁷²³

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⁷²² D14904.

⁷²³ See *The Symmetry of God*, p.36.

Conclusion

The question whether Voltaire's Jewish discourse undermines his propagandist agenda in the name of tolerance has no simple answer. If he were not Voltaire, he could have laboriously censored everything he wrote, to eliminate any expression of prejudice contrary to that agenda. The resulting writings would be nothing but a clean surface; they would not be a life's work, an *œuvre*. They would not be the truth about one man's hope of overcoming the prejudices that generate fanatical violence, and his concomitant indulgence in, and efforts to transcend, the same prejudices within himself. Surely this very complex truth can enlighten us still today.

When separating the people of the 'mythical' Bible texts from the Jews of his own day, he presents their 'brutal' *histoire* in terms of the unbelievable and miraculous nature of the Old Testament stories. He mockingly refuses to judge 'ces événements comme on juge des événements ordinaires' (1765).⁷²⁴ In *La Bible enfin expliquée*, by frequently making rhetorical use of notes in order to emphasize the farcical aspect, he postulates that it is ridiculous for the Christians and contemporary Jews to continue to believe 'fables'. Of the unbelievable trickery of Jacob and Laban he writes: 'On n'attraperait personne aujourd'hui avec de pareilles fraudes; mais ces temps-là n'étaient pas les nôtres'; of Abraham's deception of the Pharaoh by means of the reputedly beautiful but aged Sarah: 'Ces choses n'arriveraient pas aujourd'hui; mais elles étaient fréquentes alors'; of the preparations for the sacrifice of Isaac: 'Toutes ces choses sont au-dessus de la nature humaine telle qu'elle est aujourd'hui.' Underlining the separation of the ancient (mythical) times from the present day, Voltaire then concludes that 'ces temps-là étaient différents des nôtres' (1776). This manoeuvre has nothing in common with the twentieth-century projection on to the Jews of a cruel 'racial' heritage. It also relativizes Voltaire's own accusation of violence, applying it solely to the brutality of the Bible. He leaves the alleged characteristic of savagery enclosed in his anti-Judaic attacks, and removes it from the Jewish people of the eighteenth century.⁷²⁵

⁷²⁴ *La Philosophie de l'histoire*, p.230.

⁷²⁵ *La Bible enfin expliquée*, p.46, note 4, p.22, note 3, p.36, note 1, p.48, note 1.

The hallucinatory writing illustrates the obstacles to an understanding of the Jewish people, the historical and contemporary prejudices that Voltaire needed to overcome, as well as the projection and denial that were his reaction to his own experience of private and collective trauma. The output of the middle period allows us to see his deep emotional identification with the Jews, the only realistic explanation of his persevering preoccupation with them. His emphasis on a pragmatic self-acceptance, in the conclusion of *Candide*, introduces a more hopeful 'solution' than any contained in the earlier *Histoire des voyages de Scarmantado* (1754), the *conte* to which it is often compared. The increased positivity in Voltaire that became evident from this time, develops with his drive towards a greater polemical, propagandist and political investment in action that gains its strength from his desire to make himself useful. The quest for usefulness, a creative or positive mark of identity, and an existential mark that he shares with the Jews, becomes the force behind his work for the promulgation of tolerance towards all people.

Voltaire's recognition of faults that society or he himself find unacceptable drives his promotion for the improvement of the lot of those who belong with him in the collective of victims. By becoming more able to acknowledge the shared failings of self and other, he definitely moves forward from a resigned acceptance of difference as found in the seventeenth-century understanding of tolerance, to an active eighteenth-century policy striving for the rights of all persecuted people; he makes no exception of the Jews. He affords them that fundamental equality which he insists is common to all mankind, and reasserts the Jews' entitlement to the rights owing to all people. Voltaire consciously desired to resist the illogical and prejudiced ideas that his period had inherited from the past. He was not entirely successful. Studying the times when the conscious project failed, we can discern the presence of unconscious determinations at work each time he lost that generous mastery for which he deservedly remains famous. In our present era, when enlightened European consciousness is radically changed by the shock of the Second World War, inducing scholars to attempt to question every aspect of our cultural heritage, Voltaire's repeated lapses from tolerance in respect of the Jews must be excavated, and that process cannot fail to be followed by a falling

out of love with the idealized father figure of Enlightenment secularity. This study has striven to maintain a tension between the reality of Voltaire's failures and the reality of his project for the promotion of universal tolerance. In the worst of the failed writings, that intolerance of intolerance indispensable to the project of tolerance is completely misapplied and falls into intolerance *tout court*. In other places it is clear that Voltaire fraternally includes the Jews in his hope for a tolerant world.

What I hope my discussion may have contributed is some understanding of the common ground of both the failed and the successful writings, which is that Voltaire, like the rest of us, creates his identity on the 'other'. His others are the Jews, and if he were not a great champion of the oppressed and the different, his references to them might have been a simple matter of showing them as what he was not. The picture is far more complicated than that, because the Jews are the principal location of Voltaire's intense subjective involvement in his cause.

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